

10

Story
Isle Osaki

Art
Tam-U

The Hero of
Salvation and the
Age of Demons
Act 1

Full clearing
Another World
under a
GODDESS
with **Zero Believers**

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"DIA...
DIIIIA...
DIAAAH...
WHAT A
WONDERFUL
NAME!"

LABYRINTHOS
SEEMED
TO SHUDDER
AS MANA
OVERFLOWED
FROM HER.
THE GROUND,
WALLS, AND
EVEN THE AIR
STARTED TO
FREEZE.

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The Hero of Salvation and the
Age of Demons - Act 1

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Dia



IT MUST
RUN THROUGH A
LEYLINE, SINCE IT'S
SPARKLING WITH A
MASSIVE AMOUNT
OF MANA.

PURE WHITE FLOWERS
BLOOMED AROUND
THE WATER'S EDGE.

AT THE EDGE OF THE
SPRING, THERE WAS A
MASSIVE WHITE DRAGON
LYING DOWN.

Makoto

"THIS...IS
THE DEEPEST
LAYER OF
LABYRINTHOS."

Momo



Ira

ESTELLE
SNAPPED HER
FINGERS.
INSTANTLY,
SHE WAS
ENVELOPED IN
LIGHT, AND
WHEN IT FADED,
HER BODY HAD
BEEN REPLACED
WITH THE FORM
OF A BEAUTIFUL
GODDESS WITH
SPARKLING
PINK HAIR.

Characters



Makoto Takatsuki

A high school game addict who found himself in another world. As Noah's only disciple, he is determined to full-clear the world to save her.

People from the Past



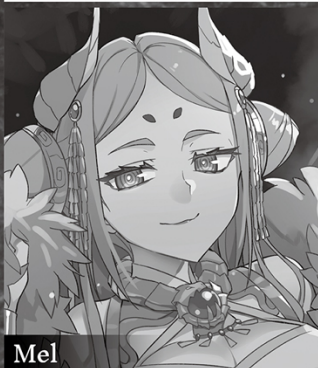
Momo

A shy girl who Makoto saved from Bifrons's human farm.



Anna

A saint and one of the members of the legendary party. Apparently, she is Abel the Savior's childhood friend...?



Mel

The white holy dragon who aided Abel the Savior. Boss of the deepest layer of Labyrinthos.



Johnnie

An accomplished elf warrior and the leader of the demi-humans. Lucy's great-grandfather.



Cain

Noah's believer from a thousand years ago. Also known as Demon Lord Cain, the hero-killer.

Highland

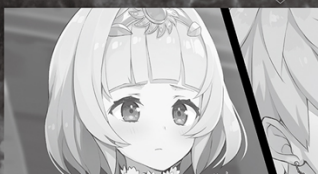
One of the leading powers on the western continent.

The largest country in terms of population, military strength, and financial strength.



Ryousuke Sakurai

Makoto's classmate and the Hero of Light. He has a strong sense of justice and is fighting against the demon lords.



Noelle

The Priestess of the Sun and princess of Highland. Sakurai's legal wife.



Grandsage

The best mage on the continent. Fought with Abel the Savior against the Great Demon Lord.

Makoto's Friends



Lucy

An elf from Springrogue who is good(?) with fire magic. Makoto's first party member.



Aya Sasaki

Makoto's classmate who was reincarnated as a lamia. She reunited with him in Roses's Labyrinthos dungeon.



Furia

The Priestess of the Moon who was once captured by Highland. She forged a guardian knight contract with Makoto.



Fujiyan

Makoto's classmate who founded the Fujiwara Trading Company in Roses.



Nina

A beastman fighter. Fujiyan bought her when she was imprisoned as a slave.



Dia

A water arch elemental with infinite mana. She aids Makoto.

Cameron

A powerhouse of international trade. They have many casinos and financial institutions.

Springrogue

The majority of the country is covered in forest. Many elves and beastmen live there.

Roses

A country blessed with many water sources. They are militarily behind the other countries.



Estelle

The Priestess of Fate. Has the ability to see the future and is thus very popular.



Rosalie

Lucy's mother, also known as the Crimson Witch. The strongest fighter in Springrogue.



Sophia

The Priestess of Water and princess of Roses. She gave Makoto the title of hero.

The Goddesses

The Sacred Deities currently rule the world after their victory during the last war. Seven goddesses have dominion: Sun, Moon, Fire, Water, Wood, Fate, and Ground.



Noah

One of the Titanea overthrown by the Sacred Deities. Currently trapped in the Seafloor Temple.



Eir

The Goddess of Water. One of the seven ruling deities. Despite her bright looks, she's actually a schemer.



Ira

The Goddess of Fate. One of the seven ruling deities. Proposed the Northern Front Plan to defeat the demon lords.

Map

The Demon Continent

● Royal Capital
Cornet

Laphroaig

The Demon Lord's
Castle

Labyrinthos



1000 years ago

10

the hero of salvation and the age of demons act 1

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Prologue: Rumors of the Demon Lord's Country

“This is Demon Lord Bifrons’s human farm.”

“H-Human farm?” My tongue tripped over the words as I instinctively repeated them.

“Yes. Many of Lord Bifrons’s subordinates eat humans, so they keep us here, with high walls all around so we can’t get out. Humans don’t live long on the farm. Demons and monsters eat us while we’re young...”

I had no words. Though I’d heard that humans were treated like cattle during this era, seeing it in action was unbelievable. *So this is the actual human farm, huh? The situation seems pretty damn hopeless.*

“A-Are there any human towns?” I asked.

“Huh? N-No... I’ve heard of some outside the walls, but I was born here, so I’ve never been to one.”

Seriously? Born on a farm? This is crazy.

As I reeled from the culture shock, the girl moved closer to me. “U-Um! My name is Momo!” she blurted out excitedly. “Would you tell me your name?”

“Uh...”

I took a moment to think about how to answer. *Can I use my real name? I’m not originally from this time. Hang on—I remember Althena giving me the green light. I don’t need to worry about the little things or fret over accidentally altering the present.*

“I’m Makoto,” I said, leaving out my family name. *That should be enough.*

“Sir Makoto...”

Momo leaned even closer. She looked frail, like a stiff breeze might blow her away. “Thank you for saving me from that danger. I have nothing to repay you with, so all I can offer...is my body. Do with it as you will.” She latched on to me with teary eyes, looking for all the world like an

abandoned puppy.

Wait, what?! What did she just say?!

“I might still be small...and inexperienced. You would be my first. But if you’re willing...could I receive your protection in exchange for my service?”

“W-Wait right there!” It went without saying that I definitely hadn’t saved her for *that* reason. She was just the first human I’d met since arriving in the past. This was a bad situation. *Time to change the subject.*

“Uh...where are your parents?”

“My dad...died three years ago.”

“O-Ooh...”

“And my mom died three days ago.”

There was nothing I could say to that.

“I don’t have anyone I can rely upon,” she admitted. “You saved me, despite being a complete stranger. My mom’s last words... Well, she said she wished for me to *live*. This shameful display is all I have to offer—it’s the only thing I can do to try and fulfill her wish. So, would you be willing to save a wretch like me...?”

Her desperation seemed to crush something in my chest. She looked ten years old at most, but she was talking like *this*. I’d rescued her without really thinking about reciprocity, but her behavior showed that this type of deal was actually the norm in this world.

I’ll need to take responsibility for saving her.

“Momo.” I placed my hands on her shoulders, pushing her away slightly.

“Y-Yes?!”

“I mentioned it earlier, but I’m looking for someone. He’s called Hero Abel. Have you heard of him?”

She paused to think. “No, I haven’t. I don’t know much about the outside world. Sorry, I’m not able to be more helpful.” Her expression darkened, then grew darker still. She must have assumed I was going to turn her away because she wasn’t useful.

“Would you help me look?” I asked. “I only just arrived here from a country that’s really far away, so I don’t know the area. Could you guide me, maybe?”

“Huh?” Her mouth hung open, as if she couldn’t understand what I’d

said. “U-Um... What exactly...do you...?”

“If you show me around, I’ll protect you. How about that?”

She floundered for a minute, then suddenly grabbed onto me again, a huge smile on her face. “Sure! Happily! It’s good to meet you!”

That was how I made my first acquaintance in this time period.



After that, Momo and I wandered the territory for around three days. From time to time, we came across locals living in hiding, but none of them had any light in their eyes. I thought they might try to come with us, even though I looked weak and Momo was young, but none of them seemed to have the energy for it.

We also tried talking to them, but no one had heard of Hero Abel.

Annoyingly, my traveling clothes made me stick out like a sore thumb among the tattered rags everyone else was wearing. So, in an attempt to blend in, I changed into the simplest clothes I could find and gave my jacket to Momo.

The humans' captors periodically distributed food throughout the farm, so they really *were* rearing people as livestock. There was a distinct possibility that the monsters and demons giving out food would randomly kill those who accepted a meal, so we never took anything. Instead, we made our camps near rivers, catching fish and such to sustain ourselves. As for the cooking...

"Can you use fire magic?" I asked Momo.

"I can. I like both fire and ground magic!"

We used Momo's skills to cook the fish and then seasoned them with the salt I had on hand.

"That's amazing," I said. "Couldn't you use your magic to fight against the monsters?"

"H-How would I do that?! There are so many people out there with stronger skills and magic than me! And none of them can stand up to the army. Even if they did manage to somehow win, the generals would kill them in an instant."

"The generals?"

"The Undead King's sixteen generals and nine bloodfiend generals. The strongest of them are Balam the Wonder, Sciulli the Temptress, and Setekh the Magic Eye. They say that not even the heroes can stand against them!"

"Ah..." I knew two of them. In fact, I'd fought them. *I have a strong connection to this place—it makes sense that I ended up here.*

"Um... Sir Makoto? You're always reading that book. What is it?"

"Hm?"

I'd been training my low rank *Sun* and *Fate Magic* since I'd arrived here—it went without saying that I'd kept up water magic practice as well.

Currently, I was training while I read the picture book *The Legend of Hero Abel*.

Momo must be curious about it.

“It’s a book that comes from my homeland. I received it as a gift from someone who’s very important to me.” My mind flashed back, and I remembered the look on Princess Sophia’s face when she gave it to me.

“I see,” Momo mumbled, slumping over. “I’m kinda jealous. I can’t read...”

I felt bad that she lacked such a fundamental skill...but it meant that I could read the book out in the open without fear of her finding out about future events. Still, I could sympathize with her a bit.

“I’ll teach you soon enough,” I said. “Magic training comes first, though. For now, let’s work on getting you to cast without incantations.”

“R-Right! I’ll do my best!”

We were traveling together for now, but that wouldn’t last forever. I wanted to teach her as much magic as possible...or at least enough to help her survive on her own.

I kept up the water magic practice and let my gaze drop to my book, which was open to the first chapter. The story centered around a boy named Abel who had awoken to his skill as a hero in the small village where he’d been raised. Apparently, he’d grown into his power alongside his mentor, the Hero of Fire. The very end of the chapter told the tale of how Abel and the other heroes worked together to defeat Demon Lord Bifrons.

That’s right—Bifrons was the first demon lord defeated by Hero Abel. Because of this, my plan was to wait here, in Bifrons’s territory, until Abel showed up.

I’d wanted to locate a large town and gather some info, but I was worried about wandering around beneath the dark clouds without any real objective. So, I figured it made more sense to wait in a location where I knew Abel would appear.

While I taught Momo some fundamentals of magic, I asked her about the farm’s territory and learned the lay of the land. Demons and monsters wandered around us from time to time, but with *Water Magic: Mist* and *Stealth* active, the chances of them finding us were pretty slim. Also, I wasn’t exactly ecstatic about the food quality...but beggars couldn’t be choosers.

There was, however, one other thing I had to worry about. Every night, Momo kept trying to “visit” me. As soon as I would finish my training for the day and lay down to sleep, she’d crawl in beside me underneath my small travel blanket.

She’d been all beat up during our first meeting, but she had still looked nice. Now, after cleaning her up with magic, giving her new clothes, and making her all neat and tidy, she looked even nicer. Whether she understood that or not... Well, I wasn’t sure. Still, she was super cute when she looked up at me through her eyelashes.

Not that I would make a move, though... Lucy and Sasa would kill me if I put my hands on a little girl within days of arriving in the past.

“Go to sleep, Momo,” I told her. “I’ll detect any monsters with my *Sense Danger* skill.”

“O-Okay...”

She slumped slightly when she realized that I wouldn’t be touching her tonight either. Eventually, she drifted off to sleep.

One day, an unfamiliar boy wandered by while we were fishing and struck up a conversation. Momo hid right away.

“Hey, mister, getting anything?” he asked casually.

“Just nibbles,” I replied. I was a bit wary of this newcomer, but he didn’t seem particularly hostile.

“Looks like more than that from where I’m standing. I’m jealous.” He gave a small pout. “Oh, I heard something kinda disturbing just recently. Did you hear?”

“Nope. What is it?”

“Hm? Well...I *could* say.” His eyes darted longingly to the fish we were cooking. I passed one over.

“Heh, thanks. Well, they’re apparently going to execute some heroes. Sir Setekh caught them, and apparently, they were here to take down Lord Bifrons. The heroes didn’t even make it to him, though, so it’s not like their attempt went anywhere. Still, the demons are going to execute them in public. To make a statement, y’know? Show that not even heroes can help us.” With that information given, the boy stood, brushed himself off, and made to leave. “You take care now.”

He was soon out of sight, and I reeled from the impact of his words.

An execution of heroes? What if Abel's one of them? If he dies, then I'll definitely fail Althena's mission!

What the hell happened while I was out here taking it easy?!

Chapter 1: Makoto Takatsuki Has a Reunion

“Um... Sir Makoto?” Momo tugged at my sleeve, sounding worried. “The demon lord’s castle is this way.”

Bifrons’s human farm was like a back garden for his pitch-black castle, so the structure itself was visible for miles. Demons from the army were constantly in the vicinity as well. They were strong—we’d be devoured in an instant if they saw us. That was why, so far, we’d kept our distance. But that boy’s news had changed everything.

An execution of heroes... If Abel is one of them, then I will have failed before even starting. As far as I could see, that outcome was a distinct possibility.

The picture book said that Abel had grown stronger as time passed. By the end of the war, he had flown through the skies on a holy dragon, fought demon lords all over the world, and become the savior. If the legends were true, then barely anyone could’ve beaten him after he’d come into his full strength. So, if you wanted to alter the past, it made the most sense to target him while he was inexperienced.

Bifrons was supposedly the first demon lord Abel defeated, and there was a group of heroes due to be executed *right now*... Things would’ve gone really sour if I hadn’t listened to that boy.

“Momo, I’m heading for the castle. I’m going to save the heroes.”

She must’ve expected that, but she still reared back and yelled in shock. “H-How?”

“I don’t know yet. I need to check out the situation first.”

“Do you have any comrades...?”

“Nope. It’s just me.”

“That’s imposs—” She cut herself off, looking down in silence. “I-I...”

Yeah, it makes sense that she’s hesitant. She wasn’t really skilled enough yet to join me in a party. She couldn’t cast without incanting, so she

wouldn't be much help in a fight. Still, the human farm was hardly a place where I could just leave her with instructions to hide and be safe. I could only protect her if she stayed by my side.

"Do you want to come with me?" I asked.

"Huh? I... I can?"

"Of course." I nodded, outwardly composed. But on the inside, *I* was panicking. I desperately wanted to find out what was happening with the soon-to-be-killed heroes.

"Follow me, Momo."

"R-Right!"

We held hands, and I used *Stealth* to rush toward the castle.

"Hmm. Guess we can't go any farther..."

Momo shook her head. "It doesn't like it's possible to get through."

We stood on a small hill near the castle. A castle's fortifications were usually built with two functions in mind: to showcase the importance of the place and to keep people out. Bifrons's castle was enclosed by a moat and high walls, so its defenses were rather strong.

Most of the castle's inhabitants were demons, though here and there I spied some elves and dwarves that appeared to be slaves. Some enslaved humans too. Every single one of the slaves was attractive—their bodies were well-built, so each stood out clearly, even at a distance.

I saw no little children or commoners like Momo or me. *Guess we can't pretend to be slaves and sneak in...*

I forced down my panic, then used *Clairvoyance* and *Listen* to gather information. The demons were loud, so the latter skill easily picked them up. I overheard three important things.

One—Bifrons wasn't currently at the castle.

Two—the heroes would be executed when he returned.

Three—there were three heroes slated for death, though I hadn't heard any names.

I guess Bifrons being away is the silver lining.

As I used *Listen* to eavesdrop on a conversation between two demons, I heard some rather interesting details.

"C'mon, we caught them in the courtyard. Why haven't we killed them yet?"

“Don’t you know? When you kill a hero, another one is born. The goddesses just give the skill to someone else. That’s why it makes the most sense to capture them and not kill them.”

“But Lord Iblis personally ordered us to kill *these* heroes, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, well, there’s some hero he wants dead at all costs—I have no idea who. Lord Bifrons is discussing it with him now.”

“Couldn’t Lord Bifrons have taken them to the meeting with Lord Iblis?”

“You fool! Who would dare parade those lowly heroes in front of Lord Iblis? Do you know how angry that would make him?”

“I don’t even want to think about it... Though, we’ve never even seen Lord Iblis in person.”

“Just hearing his voice is enough to make us shake.”

“Okay, so we’re supposed to capture heroes rather than kill them, right?”

“Yeah... I just told you that.”

“Then why does Lord Cain kill them immediately?”

“You...” The demon sighed. “Look, Lord Cain doesn’t have the common sense to realize his folly.”

“I guess so. He’s pretty touched in the head.”

“Yeah... He’s just as scary as Lord Iblis, but in a different way.”

Oh, right... The Mad Hero Cain.

Well, at least now I knew why the heroes weren’t being killed immediately. I still hadn’t found out whether Hero Abel was one of them, though. Also, Noah’s former disciple definitely didn’t have a great reputation, huh? *What kind of person is he?* I kinda wanted to meet him, but also...not so much.

“Sir Makoto... What do we do now?” Momo was chewing on an apple-looking fruit we’d found while traveling. I felt bad that it was the only food I’d been able to give her.

“I guess sneak in tonight.”

“T-Tonight?!”

“Yeah. The demons seem to sleep at night.”

We’d arrived at Bifrons’s castle last night and had been scouting for all of today. I’d noticed that there was barely anyone coming or going after dark.

I can use magic to spread some mist. There were guards, but they didn’t

seem particularly vigilant. And why would they be? Under most circumstances, no one would raid the castle. The heroes had tried, but they hadn't even made it past the castle's town. How could a small group of heroes hope to win against this demon army?

I waited for my chance, feeling uneasy. Then, late that night, I cast my spell.

"Water Magic: Spreading Mist."

It was the dead of night—maybe two in the morning. My spell covered the whole area in a shroud of fog.

Using *Stealth*, we slowly approached the town. *If Furiae were here, I would ask her to put them all to sleep... Well, no use dwelling on what-ifs.*

If we'd tried to go through the front entrance, the gatekeeper would've surely seen us, so we instead went across the moat and over the wall. I used my magic to conjure a path of water in the air and used *Walk on Water* to traverse it.

Momo's hand didn't leave mine, and her expression was nervous. *Maybe I should have had her learn Serenity first... Well, something to keep in mind for next time.*

Soon enough, we were inside the castle town's walls. Even through the mist, Bifrons's massive castle visibly loomed over us. I'd overheard that the execution was supposed to happen in the courtyard in front of the castle.

We kept to the backstreets since the main thoroughfares were lit with magic. I activated *Scout*, but it picked up an *uncomfortable* number of enemies all around us, so I stopped. Instead, I relied on *Sense Danger* to avoid the demons. Slowly, we slipped toward the center of the town.

Is this what a terrorist feels like when infiltrating an enemy country?

Using the thick mist and *Stealth*, we managed to somehow make it to the courtyard. We scoped out the place while hiding in the shadow of a building.

"Are you okay, Momo?" I whispered.

"I-I am... I'm scared, but I know I'll be fine as long as I'm with you."

I gave Momo's hand a squeeze, and she held on to me tightly.

There were around a dozen monsters on watch. Gargoyles. This would be annoying. I also spotted several cages in the middle of the courtyard—there were people inside them.

What should I do?

The gargoyles sat atop pillars that were scattered around the courtyard. They could readily observe the entire area, so a sneak attack wouldn't be easy. Though I wanted to be cautious, I also didn't want to spend too long here.

As I contemplated my next move, I used *Listen*, trying to hear the guards' conversation.

"The mist's pretty thick tonight."

"Yeah, it's been awful. My whole body's aching."

"Aye. If we had a campfire, we could at least warm up."

"I'm with you. Wanna take a break?"

"The captain'll have our heads for that."

"We'll just warm up around the fire for an hour or so. Once we're in a better mood, we'll be better guards."

Gargoyles were monsters made of stone, right? I guess that meant they hated the humidity. Let's make it all the more unpleasant for them.

Water Magic: Deep Thick Mist.

"Bleck, it's getting worse."

"I ain't standing for this. I'm gonna get warm!"

"Ah! No fair! I wanna go too!"

"Come on! Someone needs to stay!"

"You hang back then, Captain!"

"Age before beauty, damn you!"

In the end, they left. Technically, one of them stayed, but if we were careful, we could get to the cages without being spotted—the gargoyle who'd missed his chance was grumbling and not focusing on keeping watch. That counted as dereliction of duty...but I wasn't going to complain.

Slowly, we moved through the mist, keeping *Stealth* active. I peered into the nearest cage and saw a man bound in chains. He seemed to be sleeping, but his eyes snapped open as soon as I got close. He looked at me, gaze wary.

"Are you...human?" he whispered.

"I came to save the heroes," I explained simply. "You're one of them, right?"

His eyes widened. "I am. If you can call someone who gets captured like this a hero... I would appreciate your assistance. These cages were made by Sciulli's darkness magic, so they'll be hard to open without—"

I didn't wait for him to finish before I unsheathed Noah's dagger. With a quiet *shink*, the blade parted the bars.

"Wha?!"

I ignored the man's shock and focused on slicing through the chains and shackles that bound him. I tried to catch the metal restraints before they hit the ground, hoping to prevent any noise from alerting the guard. However, they were so heavy that I nearly dropped them. Momo had to take up the slack.

"Are you okay, Sir Makoto?" she asked.

"Thanks, Momo."

"O-Of course!"

Apparently, I was physically weaker than Momo... How sad.

The man looked dumbfounded. "Who in the...?"

"I'm Makoto. I came at Althena's behest to save the heroes. What's your name?"

His expression instantly hardened, becoming serious. "I'm Volf, the Hero of Ground. Thanks for your aid. My companions are in the other cages. Help them."

This wasn't the man I was looking for. Still, there were others—maybe one of them was Abel?

"Got it. Are they heroes too?"

"Yeah, they are—Julietta, the Hero of Wood, and Abel, the Hero of Lightning."

I jolted, fist-pumping internally. I'd found Abel the Savior. Volf had definitely said, "Abel, the Hero of Lightning." It seemed weird that he hadn't called him the Hero of Light, but Abel had both skills, so this was definitely him.

I took a moment to collect my composure, then turned to Momo. "Let's go. Time to get the others out."

"Of course, Sir Makoto."

"I want to know who you are later," muttered Volf.

With our hushed conversation put on pause, Momo and I moved to the next cage. Inside was a long-haired woman. *This must be the Hero of Wood, Julietta*. I used my dagger to cut through the chains binding her.

Then came the final cage. I spied a fairly petite guy inside who looked around the same age as me. The dim light made it hard to see, but he had

almost glowing blond hair and handsome features. His head was bowed though, so I couldn't make out his expression properly.

This...is Abel the Savior?

I'd finally met him. I took a moment to marvel at the reality of the situation—the man was a living legend, one who I'd heard about in all corners of this world.

I used Noah's dagger to cut him free of the cage and chains. As I focused, the other two heroes began throwing questions at me.

"What exactly is that thing...?" Volf asked, his gaze focused on the dagger. "What's it made of?"

"Th-Thank you..." Julietta whispered. "But who are you?"

Abel stayed still—his head remained bowed.

"I'm Makoto, and this is Momo," I replied. "We came to help you. Before anything else, we need to get out of here."

"Good plan—let's go. Julietta, Abel."

"Got it, Volf."

There was a long pause after Julietta's answer, and then...

"Right," muttered Abel.

So apparently, the Hero of Ground is the leader of the trio...

We crept away from the courtyard through the mist, making sure the gargoyle still on watch duty couldn't see us. We carried on through the back alleys for a while and almost made it to the wall, when suddenly, a clanging noise of metal on metal split the air. All around us, voices erupted.

"The heroes have escaped!"

"Find them!"

Tch, they noticed.

"Run!" Volf called out.

We reached the wall in moments. It was around three meters tall, and neither Momo nor I could use flight magic. *We'll have to figure out how to get over it.*

"Hruh!"

With that grunt of exertion from Volf, a massive hole opened up in the wall. *Guess that's the kind of thing you'd expect from a hero.* We all stepped through and then jumped across the moat to the far bank. Well, nearly... I almost fell, but Julietta caught me and yanked me back up.

"Y-You okay?" she asked.

“Thank you...” *How could they all leap over those two meters so easily?*
Actually, now that I thought about it, Momo had pretty high physical stats.

“Let’s get out of here before the demons find us!” exclaimed Volf.

“Right!” said Julietta. “I have to say, this thick mist is a real help. I’ve never seen weather like this around here.”

“Sir Makoto is making the mist!” Momo told her.

“Oh? He is? That’s incredible. It’s covering such a huge area.”

“That’s right! Sir Makoto’s incredible!”

Momo and the Hero of Wood were chatting happily to each other. *They sure made friends quickly.*

“Keep the noise down,” Volf chided, though his expression seemed reluctantly amused.

“Got it!” the two said in unison.

Abel remained silent, staring down at the ground. A dark look had clouded his features.

This wasn’t at all how I’d imagined him...

After that, the five of us spent a while running. The heroes were covered in wounds, but they were moving shockingly fast...especially given that they had no shoes. We kept up our flight through the dark forest, and eventually, we managed to escape and shake any pursuit.

“Haaah!” The Hero of Ground sighed heavily. “We got away! We’re free!”

“Gahhh... I thought we were done for this time,” murmured the Hero of Wood.

We were currently camping in a cave that Volf had constructed with his magic. Julietta had spent some time hunting, and now, skewers of wild rabbits, birds, and such were roasting over the fire. The smell of the meat was becoming truly tantalizing. Momo’s stomach growled—her cheeks flushed, and she let out a cry of embarrassment.

Volf turned to her. “Oh, little miss, you must be hungry. Go ahead and eat. We owe you, after all.”

“Eat up, Momo!” offered Julietta.

“I can’t! Sir Makoto did it all, so—”

I interrupted her. “Momo, you can go ahead and eat.” Honestly, I wasn’t really all that hungry.

Momo took a skewer and bit into the roasted meat. I sat back, enjoying

the charming scene. Well, I pretended to. In actuality, I was using the perspective control function of *RPG Player* to inspect the three heroes.

Volf, the Hero of Ground, was well-built. Scars crisscrossed his skin, wordlessly telling the tales of past battles. He'd looked severe and serious for our initial meeting and subsequent flight, but now he was smiling openly as he chowed down on a skewer of his own. When he lamented the lack of booze, he reminded me of Lucas, the veteran adventurer in Macallan.

Actually, I wonder how Lucas is doing...

Julietta, the Hero of Wood, had long chestnut hair and long ears—she was an elf. A really beautiful one at that. Her clothes were all ragged, so some rather risqué areas were *almost* on display, but she didn't seem to care about anything peeking out. She *did* seem to have taken a real shine to Momo though, and was constantly fussing over her. Momo seemed happy to have an older woman to talk to.

And finally...

Abel, the Hero of Lightning. His hair was almost pure gold, and his eyes were the color of sapphires. He had delicate features that almost appeared womanly, but his muscles and chest were definitely masculine. Even after all this time, he hadn't said a word—he just stared into the flames of the campfire.

"C'mon, Abel. You could at least thank the two of them..." Volf said.

Julietta nodded. "That's right. They came to save us."

Despite their urging, Abel didn't speak.

"Sorry, Sir Makoto." Volf glanced at me sheepishly. "Abel lost someone dear to him in the battle..."

"He's usually much happier," Julietta added.

I shook my head at their apologies. "You were all on the verge of getting executed, so I can't really blame him. I'm just glad I was able to follow through on my promise to Althena."

"That's right!" Julietta exclaimed. "Who *are* you? Are you a hero? Only the priestesses can hear the goddesses...and you're a guy...so what's going on?!" She leaned closer and closer, gushing and practically overflowing with curiosity.

"U-Uh..." I stammered. "It's...complicated."

I noticed a sweet scent wafting from her skin... She kinda reminded me

of Mary from the Macallan guild.

Oh, right, I need to get back on track. Idly chatting was fine, but there were things I needed to know.

“Where are you heroes planning to go now?” I asked. Momo and I had nothing tying us down, so I wanted to accompany them if possible.

“We’re heading back to base,” answered Volf. “Would the two of you be willing to come with us? We can talk in detail there.”

Ah, they have a base. Awesome. “We’ve got nowhere else to go, so sure. Where is it?”

“Well, do you know Labyrinthos?” Julietta asked.

Hang on...? “Labyrinthos? As in...the dungeon?”

“That’s the one! We made our base on the top level. With the demon lords ruling the continent, there aren’t any proper towns, so...the dungeons are the only places we can hide.”

Oh, so *that’s* how they’d manage to stay hidden. Though, things were really grim if dungeons teeming with monsters were the safe option...

Julietta cocked her head, looking at me inquisitively. “Where in the world did you come from, Sir Makoto? Lady Momo seems to hail from the farm itself, but surely you do not? I cannot imagine mere monsters managing to take you out. However, you seem unfamiliar with this area.”

“I came from a very distant country,” I answered. That was as much info as I could give—after all, I could hardly say that I’d come from a thousand years in the future.

“I see.” Volf nodded. “Well, all right, let’s leave the chatter here for tonight. We should nap and then get back to—”

Suddenly, Volf was cut off by a vicious tremor that shook the ground beneath our feet.

Was that a spell?!

Unfamiliar voices yelled out nearby.

“They’re here!”

“The heroes?!”

“Maybe! Flush them out!”

“If the demon lord finds out that we let them slip away, we’re dead!”

Along with the voices, I could hear thundering footfalls.

We were followed?!

“They found us! Let’s go! Abel! Julietta!” Volf clapped the two heroes

on their shoulders.

“Argh, this is the worst!” Julietta complained.

“Sir Makoto!”

Momo looked pale, so I took her hand. *I...really wish I'd eaten some of that meat...*

A gargoyle poked its head into the clearing, and with a roar, Volf reared back and punched it. Taking advantage of the opening, Volf leaped over the crumpled monster—the rest of us followed.

“Ack, we’re surrounded!” Julietta cried out.

She was right. At a rough count, there were around a hundred of them. I could see huge, doglike monsters at the front. *Maybe they were similar to bloodhounds or something. Did they follow us by scent?*

“Momo, stay with me,” I murmured.

“I will!”

I kept her hand in mine and drew my dagger to protect us. Unfortunately, I hadn’t slept much over the last couple of days, and I could sense that my focus wasn’t quite at a hundred percent.

“It’s the heroes! Capture them!” growled one of the monsters.

“Kill them if you can’t!”

“Arrrghhh!”

Our foes all came at once. Every one of them was fairly strong.

“*Water Magic: Water Dragon.*”

My spell collided with some charging monsters and warded them off. I’d already been borrowing mana from the elementals for days on end, so my magic felt a little weaker than usual. I’d be fine though—I was more worried about the heroes. After all, they were still only equipped with the gear they’d been allowed to have as captives.

The Hero of Ground was fighting about ten monsters barehanded.

The Hero of Wood had used her magic to create a makeshift whip from the plants in the area. Her movements were smooth, showing clear signs of training.

My real worry...was Abel. He was swaying on his feet as he bore the attacks of the monsters. Was he okay...?

Fortunately, the other heroes were strong, and they managed to defeat most of the monsters on their own. How had those two been caught in the first place?

I took whatever openings I could find to support them with water magic.
Phew, I think we'll cope...

Just as I was breathing a sigh of relief, I heard Julietta scream Abel's name.

I whipped around, and...Abel must have slipped. A skeleton knight riding atop a wyvern was bearing down on him with a spear.

C-Crap!

Hurriedly, I called out to the elementals.

Help him!

Only a single water elemental appeared.

Then...

"Sir Makoto?!" screamed the voice of a young girl. While I'd been focused on Abel, a huge beast had rushed past me.

"Momo?!" I shouted.

Before I could register what was happening, she'd been caught in a griffin's talons. The beast soared up into the air.

"Wha?!" It took me a beat to take in what was going on—Abel would be skewered in a few more seconds, and Momo had been abducted.

Althena's voice echoed through my mind. *If Abel dies, the world will end.*

I didn't have time to think anymore.

"Water Magic: Dragon Talon."

I forced the mana from the elemental into my dagger to create a blade I could launch at the wyvern and skeleton knight. The blow shattered against my foes, and the monsters fell to pieces.

By the time I managed to regain sight of them, Momo and the griffin that'd taken her were nothing but specks in the distance.

"Heroes! If you want to save her, then come to the castle!"

"Sir Makotooooo!"

My *Listen* skill barely picked up those parting words.

Meanwhile, Volf and Julietta managed to fight off the last of the monsters attacking them. Abel's expression was still dark. We might have repelled the attack, but none of us looked happy.

"What are we doing, Julietta?" Volf asked.

"Saving Momo, obviously!" she answered immediately.

They seemed ready to go straight back to the castle. The two of

them...were heroes to the bone. But if they got captured again, there would've been no point in saving them in the first place.

"You should head to your base in Labyrinthos," I told them.

"What?!" Julietta demanded. "But what about Momo?!"

Volf's eyes widened. "How could you say that?!"

The three heroes' expressions morphed into shock at my suggestion. Even Abel's became slightly more twisted.

"You don't have any real weapons or armor. If you go back, you're going to your deaths," I reasoned.

Silence was their only answer. After all, they stood empty-handed in ragged clothes. None of them could refute me.

"I'll join up with you later. You said the base is on the top layer of Labyrinthos, right?"

"Huh?! What are you going to do while we're at the base?!" Julietta asked.

Well, that goes without saying. "I'm going to rescue Momo from the demon lord's castle."

◇ Hero Abel's Perspective ◇

"I'm going to rescue Momo from the demon lord's castle."

The person who had saved us said this casually, like he was announcing his intent to go for a stroll.

"Don't be foolish!" shouted Volf. "Going alone is practically suicide!"

"That's right! We'll come with you!" Julietta insisted.

But the man just shook his head. "If you die, my mission will be a failure."

"Urk..."

"W-Well..."

That curt response silenced the other two. I shifted. He—the man calling himself Makoto, on a mission from Althena—stared straight at me.

Don't look at me like that... I know I'm useless.

◇ Several Days Ago — The Plan to Fight Bifrons ◇

We were the strongest squad, with the Hero of Fire as our leader. The

outcome of our quest was almost assured—we would manage to kill the demon lord this time.

But...we were attacked by Demon Lord Cain and Setekh the Magic Eye before we could reach the castle. Over half of us were killed by Cain, and the rest were petrified by Setekh and captured.

Our leader, my teacher, was killed.

I couldn't do anything. My confidence as a burgeoning hero with the ability to kill countless monsters and demons...was shattered. Demon lords were horrifying, impossible existences. The chances of victory were zero. Even our leader had stood no chance against Cain.

We can never win...

My teacher's death...shattered my heart. And I remained mired in those feelings, even after *he* saved us.

Volf and Julietta didn't seem to have given up, but I had lost any motivation to fight against the demon lords. That was why I barely cared as the monsters attacked our camp. But because of my apathy...the girl had been abducted. *Because of me...* Our rescuer had prioritized protecting me over saving her.

I didn't know why, but...

"I'm going back to the castle. You three wait in Labyrinthos."

He'd said this before nonchalantly turning to head down the path we'd taken away from captivity.

He was alone. Would he manage? Could we *let* him go by himself?

"Wait! Take...take me with you!"

I didn't even realize I'd been speaking until the words had left my lips.



"Um...are you angry, Makoto?" I asked hesitantly.

Currently, we were traveling back to Bifrons's castle. When I'd insisted on coming with him, his expression had turned sour—it was the first negative expression I'd seen on his face. It was obvious that he hadn't wanted me to come along.

Y-You don't need to look at me like that...

"I appreciate the offer, but I'd rather you head to where it's safe," he'd replied immediately.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Julietta had interjected on my behalf. “Volf and I aren’t much use without weapons since we’re the vanguard, but Abel’s great with healing and support magic—he’ll be a real asset!”

Volf had wanted us to all go to the castle. There’d been an argument, but Makoto had said that he wanted to hurry up, so the other two had withdrawn. I hadn’t really fought against the monsters, so I wasn’t tired and would be able to support him with healing magic.

Soon, Makoto and I broke through the tree line and spotted the castle. In the darkness of night, it was lit brilliantly.

“Um, Makoto...”

He was silent for a moment, then asked, “What is it?”

“Nothing...”

He hadn’t said a word since we’d parted from the others. *He must be angry with me...I guess?*

Suddenly, a huge shadow, darker than the night, darted across the sky.

“Stop, Abel,” murmured Makoto.

“R-Right!”

We hid beneath the forest’s canopy and waited. The shadow turned out to belong to a dragon—several dragons—flying overhead. Well, to be more specific, ten of them were wyverns and one was a red dragon. They flew gracefully through the air.

These are...

“Bifrons’s dragon knights...” I muttered shakily.

“Huh. So the demon lord’s back.”

In contrast to my quavering voice, Makoto’s was even. Did he even feel fear? The dragons were flying away from us, and their forms shrank as they neared the castle.

“All right, Abel. Let’s get going again.”

With that simple statement, he started walking off steadily.

“W-Wait!” I stammered. “Bifrons is back in the castle. It’s too late. We can’t save her...”

“Abel.” Makoto stopped, then turned around to look at me.

My breath caught in my throat. His eyes were like clear pools of water. In their depths, I saw no sign of nerves, anger, fear, or even righteousness.

“You should head back to Volf and Julietta,” he said.

I jolted. *Does he think I’m losing my nerve? Surely everyone fears the*

demon lords!

Without another word, he silently carried on toward the castle. If I didn't follow...he wouldn't turn back. *Does he not care if I'm with him or not?*

"If you're coming, stay close," he said over his shoulder.

I jumped. "O-Okay!"

I was sure he hadn't been looking at me, so how could he have possibly known what I'd been doing? He was a strange person. His voice sounded cold, but despite that, I could tell he was being considerate. Unlike my teacher or Volf, he wasn't large in any way. Even so, I felt somehow at ease looking at his back.

"Let's take turns keeping watch until nightfall."

"G-Got it..."

It was now around midday, and we were near the castle, hidden inside a thicket of shrubs just big enough for two people to lie down in. I'd been certain that Makoto would burst straight into the fortress, but he'd decided to wait until nighttime.

"You sleep first," he said.

"N-No, you must be tired. I'll keep watch."

Silence fell between the two of us.

"Okay," he eventually conceded. "Wake me in an hour." With that, he lay down, and I heard his breathing even out after a few seconds.

It was just past noon—the worst time to try and sneak in anywhere. I stared vacantly out toward the castle. Suddenly, something flitted past my eyes. A blue butterfly. It was fluttering around Makoto, borne by its transparent wings.

"Is that thing...made of water magic?" I murmured. I could feel a hint of mana. But...where was it coming from? Makoto was sleeping.

Then, the realization struck me—he was using magic in his sleep. I shuddered. *Isn't he resting? He's training even while passed out...*

"What in the world *are* you?"

He'd saved us from the demon lord's execution grounds like it was nothing; he'd fearlessly decided to storm the army's stronghold alone to save a girl. He'd said that Althena had given him a mission, but...she hadn't said anything to me about that. *Even though Althena gifted me with the Hero of Lightning skill...*

When I'd asked Makoto which hero skill he had, he'd replied that he didn't have one at all.

But he's so strong. If I could just sneak a peek at his skills...

I used my saint rank *Appraisal* on him.

He's telling the truth. The only combat skills he possessed were low rank levels of *Water*, *Sun*, and *Fate Magic*, along with *Elementalist*. He also had a couple of skills I didn't really know—*Calm Mind* and...*RPG Player*. I was shocked at how low his stats were. And, on top of all of that...he wasn't even part of Althena's faith?! Why would she give a mission to a nonbeliever?! I couldn't understand what was going on.

What was *with* this person? He was sleeping like a log despite how close we were to the castle. What had he gone through to make him turn out like this?

I gave up on understanding him.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

"Let's get going."

"It's still evening, though..." Abel said. "Are you sure?"

I'd waited until it was dark last time, and that would likely be the best strategy this time too, but...

"I'm worried about Momo," I admitted.

Abel didn't argue.

"Y'know, you can wait here," I told him.

"A-After coming this far?! I'm going with you."

"All right."

Personally, I would be pretty put out if he died, so it would've been better for him to stay behind. But regardless, things were looking a bit more optimistic now. For starters, I was properly rested. Since going back in time, I hadn't been able to truly relax—the stress of not knowing whether Abel was alive had kept me on edge. On top of that, I'd spent over twenty-four hours awake before we'd set out to rescue Momo.

I'd needed real sleep. My lack of rest was what had allowed Momo to get captured in the first place—my concentration had faltered, and I'd failed her.

Elementals, are you there?

Yup! came a resounding chorus of voices.

Yes, my liege.

Even Undyne answered along with the normal elementals.

I was ready.

Water Magic: Spreading Mist.

It'd only been a day, so the castle's inhabitants would be on high alert. There were a lot of monsters keeping watch. I used *Scout* to find places with fewer guards and added *Stealth* on top of it. This combination was starting to become a habit, but it was the best method I had. Abel had *Stealth* as well. Then again, it was probably a requirement for survival in this time period.

Slowly, we crept closer to the castle. The gate was heavily guarded.

Is there anywhere we can use to slip in...? The castle was huge, and so were the monsters. Surely there was some crack that a human could sneak through.

So many monsters and demons... I was sensing even more than yesterday. I figured they'd all gone out to search for the escaped heroes...but apparently not.

Well, they'd taken Momo as a hostage, so they'd be keeping a close eye on the castle.

As we were sneaking around—

“Wha? Sir...Makoto...?”

—someone called my name. *There are only four people in this era who know my name, so that voice must be the person I'm looking for.*

I hurriedly turned to where the voice had come from.

Momo. She's here. But...

“Wha?!”

When I saw her, I was utterly lost for words. She was wearing what looked like a maid outfit.



The clothes didn't matter.

"Makoto! I-It's no good. We're too late. She's—"

I wasn't listening to Abel. On unsteady feet, I approached her.

"Sir Makoto...don't come any closer..."

"Momo..."

I needed to apologize. Divine edict or not, I hadn't kept my promise to protect her—I'd chosen to save Abel instead.

I couldn't muster a coherent thought, though.

"Makoto, get away from her!" Abel hissed. "She's... She's a vampire!"

A vampire?

Momo's face twisted in sadness. "Lord Bifrons turned me. I'm your enemy now..."

Her head slumped forward as she forced the words out. Her hair fell around her face—it was now snow-white. Her dark eyes were red. Bloodred. Small fangs peeked out from beneath her lips. But the thing that shocked me more than anything else...was that I recognized her like this.

Hers was a very familiar face. The face of someone who'd helped me over and over again.

How had I not noticed? Was it because she spoke differently? Because her expressions were different?

It made sense—she didn't look at all like Momo when she smiled so boldly. But...

She said she didn't meet me in this time period...

The liar.

There was no doubt about it—Momo was the Grandsage.

Chapter 2: Makoto Takatsuki Meets People

“You *are* Momo...right?”

I grabbed her arm. Her slender, cold arm.

“N-No! Get away!” she cried.

“Be careful, Makoto!” Abel warned. “She’s the demon lord’s thrall now!”

“You’re a vampire...yeah?”

“I am. I can act of my own accord, but Lord Bifrons’s voice is always whispering in my mind,” she mumbled. “If he orders me to attack you, I won’t be able to resist...”

“Makoto... Vampire sires and their offspring have strong connections in the threads of fate,” Abel explained. “Offspring cannot disobey their sires. Because Momo was turned by Bifrons...”

The Grandsage and Abel were both downcast, and their voices were morose.

Threads of fate... That was a familiar term. It was Furiae who’d told me about them. She was the Priestess of the Moon who used *Fate Magic* to detect the threads of fate.

So Bifrons can use them to control any vampire he turns...

“Momo, are you okay for now?”

“I am. I can hear him, but my body is under my control. I don’t think I can venture far from the castle, though...”

Right, that *was* an issue. We couldn’t escape together like this.

Suddenly, letters formed and arranged themselves in the air.

Will you abandon Momo?

Yes

►No

Why would you even ask me that, RPG Player? There's no way I'd leave her.

But how should I do it? What can I do about those threads? I couldn't even see them.

Actually, though... Could I? Ira had given me *Fate Magic* as a skill. *I'm still practically a novice at it, but maybe I can pull this off.*

I hummed, pondering my options, then used *RPG Player* to change my viewpoint to look at Momo.

Fate Magic (Low Rank).

I pushed mana into my eyes and focused my gaze on her. At first, I couldn't see anything...but gradually, I could pick out what looked like taut lines stretching out from her small frame. One of them was vivid, shining red, like blood.

This might just work. The red one must lead to Bifrons.

That thread was binding Momo. Because of it, she couldn't disobey him. If I could just cut it...

I unsheathed Noah's dagger.

"Makoto?!"

"S-Sir Makoto?! What're you doing?!"

Whoops. Guess I didn't warn them before pulling out my weapon.

"Momo, can you trust me and stay still?" I asked.

"Huh?" She looked at me for a long moment, confusion evident on her face, before nodding firmly. "I can. I trust you."

"Thanks."

I channeled the fate-aligned mana into Noah's dagger, then slipped it through the bloodred thread in one clean stroke.

The girl twitched, letting out a sharp cry.

"Momo!" I exclaimed, hurrying to support her body.

Ragged gasps tore from her lips, and I waited for her to calm down.

"Momo, are you okay?!" Abel asked, coming close to us. Despite his initial hesitancy at her vampiric state, he must have been worried.

"S-Sir Makoto..."

"Can you still hear him, Momo?" I asked.

Abel stared at me strangely. "Makoto... What did you do?"

I didn't answer him—I just waited for Momo to reply. After a while, she caught her breath. Her red eyes focused on me.

“I... I can’t!” she cried out joyously. “I can’t hear him anymore! That stifling feeling in my chest is gone too!”

Yesss! It worked! Noah’s dagger really was amazing. It could cut through anything.

“Makoto, what did you do?” Abel asked again.

“I cut the thread of fate.”

There was a long pause.

“What...? No... You can’t have...”

“You’re free now, right?” I asked Momo.

“I am... Whatever was binding me before, it’s gone now. Sir Makoto...you’re amazing.” Momo’s eyes were wide as she grabbed my sleeve.

It felt *really* weird seeing the Grandsage’s face make that expression.

“But that’s...something...only the gods can do...” Abel babbled, his expression dazed.

“It is?” I replied. Well, Noah’s dagger was a relic of the gods, so that made sense. It was the weapon that was impressive, though, not me.

“Momo, Abel, let’s hurry up and get outta here,” I urged.

But it was too late. A mocking voice, carried by a gust of wind, reached our ears. The magic mist I’d conjured instantly dissipated.

“Foolish heroes... You think you can just come and go whenever you please?”

Now that the mist had cleared, I could see the horde of demons and monsters surrounding us—they were all staring.

So this is a trap...

One figure in particular drew my attention—a demon clad in red armor. He was over two meters tall, and I could sense that he had more mana than any of the others.

“Balam the Wonder...” I heard Abel mutter.

That...sounded familiar. It was the name of one of Bifrons’s subordinates—Momo and the others had mentioned him.

“The heroes of Ground and Wood are not here, leaving just you, the Hero of Lightning, and...a weak human. What a shame.” Balam stroked his beard in disappointment. “My lord has instructed that all heroes besides the Hero of Light should be captured. I suppose I should remove your legs so you cannot escape again.”

Balam's subordinates roared in response.

The Hero of Light, huh? They don't know that it's actually Abel...?

I glanced at the hero next to me. He remained unmoving, a nervous look on his face. *He didn't react to the name either.* A lot about this situation was bothering me, but before I could figure anything out, we needed to get out of here.

I pulled Momo close to protect her. She tightened her grip on my clothes. She was shaking...but it wasn't out of fear. No, she was glaring at the general with undisguised hatred. I'd never seen that look in her eyes before.

"Momo, what did he do?" I asked.

"He...ate my mother..."

My whole body jolted. "I see..."

When we'd first met, Momo had told me that her mother had died three days prior. Several days had passed since then, but the emotional wound was surely still raw and open. I could see it written on her face—Momo could clearly picture her mother being killed. I couldn't understand what it must be like to have the person responsible for your parent's death standing right in front of you.

"Makoto, we're surrounded, but there aren't that many of them," Abel whispered into my ear. "We can break through if we focus on a single point. Let's go before reinforcements arrive."

With a regretful look on her face, Momo nodded. "Balam the Wonder is the eldest of Bifrons's generals... He's very strong."

"That's right," said Abel. "We can't fight him, so let's run."

Both of their voices were tight with nerves.

"Makoto?"

"Sir Makoto?"

I didn't answer either of them. Instead, I just glanced around. Several hundred monsters and demons surrounded us. I could feel vast amounts of mana from Iblis's blessings upon them. These soldiers were far stronger than the monsters from my era, a thousand years in the future. This situation was definitely what you'd call "dire straits."

But for some reason...my thoughts were at peace. Only one word floated up in my mind: "inadequate."

Is this my skill? Calm Mind...release.

Nothing changed. I still wasn't disconcerted. Instead, my feelings were tranquil, like a placid ocean.

Well, I know exactly why...

Just the other day, I'd fought against the Hero of the Sun, Alexander, and that battle had redefined my perception of strength. So what about the general, the demons, and the monsters in front of me? *They're a rabble...* No, not even that. Honestly, it just felt like there were a bunch of ants assembled. I wasn't going to be scared off by the likes of them.

What would Noah say if she were here?

"Makoto! Hurry up and blast those weaklings away!"

"Right, Goddess," I muttered to myself. I turned back to my companions. "Momo. As an apology for taking so long to find you, I'll get your revenge."

"Huh?"

Her eyes went wide. Abel's mouth dropped open.

"I must be mistaken," Balam rumbled, frowning wickedly. "I could have sworn I heard the foolish ramblings of livestock."

He has good ears.

"Abel, can you look after Momo?" I asked, passing her over.

He stared at me wide-eyed. "W-Wait, Makoto!"

"Sir Makoto! We should run!"

The two of them panicked, but I turned back to Balam.

"Kill all but the hero," the demon ordered bluntly.

There was a roar of acknowledgment from the demons and a general roar of enthusiasm from the monsters.

They leaped at us.

Abel grunted as he protected Momo.

"xxxxxxxxxxxx. (Elementals, go nuts.)" I said in Elemanti.

Right!!!

They were in a good mood today.

Just before the mass of monsters reached us, I cast my spell.

Water Magic: Ice World.

Instantly, all the monsters froze. There were still plenty of enemy demons left, though. Balam let out an impressed murmur.

“Die!” A pitch-black demon suddenly lunged at me, wielding a huge sickle.

Momo screamed, and Abel shouted out, “It’s one of the bloodfiends!”

This monster seemed viciously strong, so I decided to call in the big guns. “xxxxxxxxxxxx, (Undyne, stop him.)”

Yes, my liege!

Using Undyne’s mana, I cast a saint rank spell.

Water Magic: Holy Ice Barrier.

“Guuaaaah!” The bloodfiend collided with the barrier and instantly froze.

My attacks were getting a bit repetitive... Well, whatever—this was the most efficient way.

“Useless!” Balam growled. “All of you, get him!”

The monsters and demons crashed upon us like waves. I used huge amounts of mana from the elementals (both the normal ones and Undyne) to push them back. Luckily, elementals had infinite mana. I had to be careful though—the last time I got carried away with mana, I lost control and the Grandsage scolded me...

But this time, for some reason, I wasn’t tiring from magic usage. Maybe it was because my mastery was now 999?

I glanced back at Momo and Abel. Both were gaping at me, slack-jawed. When Momo’s eyes met mine, they began to sparkle. “You’re amazing, Sir Makoto!” She still looked like the Grandsage, so there was a real dissonance between her current beaming expression and the cooler one I’d come to recognize.

“Pay attention!” shouted Abel as he pointed at an incoming foe.

Whoops, that demon’s headed straight for me. Must’ve pissed him off.

“Water Magic: Ice World.”

Man...they really only have numbers going for them, huh?

◇ The Demon Lord’s General’s Perspective ◇

I, Balam the Wonder, have served Lord Bifrons for over five hundred years, slaughtering countless fools who dared to target my liege. In recent days, Setekh the Magic Eye had caught a group of heroes attempting to infiltrate the castle. Our orders were to execute them. However, the foolish

gargoyles let them slip away.

Then, one of them reappeared.

Lord Iblis's orders were to find and kill the Hero of Light. If we succeeded, demonkind would rule for over a thousand years. As a warrior myself, I was interested in testing my mettle against this Hero of Light, should they turn out to be a formidable opponent—I had no expectations of that, though. Very few had the nerve to stand up against the demons, and I had yet to meet a warrior worthy of the name. Until today, that is.

My subordinates were being frozen, one after another.

“Interesting...”

This opponent had some promise. It would still be an affront to bring him before Lord Bifrons...but he was far more to look at than the Hero of Lightning, who was trembling nearby.

“I am Balam the Wonder!” I proclaimed, drawing my sword. “The first of Lord Bifrons's trusted!”

I had never felt the need to offer my name to a human before. The mage glanced in my direction but made no reply.

“Answer in kind!” I demanded.

He just stared quizzically at me.

At this point, I lost my cool. *He's nothing but a lowly human! And he can't even offer his name before a fight.* In that case, a single slash was all he deserved.

“*Wondrous Sword: Darkness Cutter.*” A wave of jet-black miasma flew from my blade.

“×××××××,” the human said. I couldn't parse the language, but his words caused a huge barrier to appear.

He blocked my slash.

An ice barrier? Impressive, but your mana is not without end. Once you have exhausted your reserves, this fight is over.

I launched another slash.

So, human, how long can you last?



“Impossible, impossible, impossible...”

Every slash, thrust, and spell—he warded them all off with his magic.

Before I knew it, my subordinates had been completely wiped out. How did this human still have mana? What's more, he hadn't moved... Not a single step. It made no sense, and the human looked completely unbothered. *He. Just. Keeps. Casting.* Where was all this mana coming from?

“××××××××? ×××...”

Those words, spoken in a language I'd never heard before, spilled from his lips, directed at a patch of empty space.

Wait...could that be the elemental language Lord Cain uses sometimes...? The human is...an elemental? Even so...

His eyes, utterly unreadable, turned to face me. Slowly, he took a step forward.

“C-Come on, then!” I readied my sword once again, pouring all of my mana into it. “Ahhhhhhh!”

This was my last resort—I would throw everything I had into this attack. My spellword strike would mince whoever it met, flaying them with ninety-nine slashes.

But...

“Water Magic: Holy Ice Barrier.”

My last resort, my opus... He warded it off emotionlessly with a barrier of ice. My blade stopped before it could touch him.

“Guh...” With all my energy depleted, I fell to my knees. White hoarfrost crept across the ground beneath me, the chill slowly encroaching.

And...he encroached as well. Why would a mage, who excelled at long-range attacks, close the distance? Still, it was an opportunity.

M-My true last resort. As cowardly and dishonorable as this is...

“No, Makoto! Balam the Wonder has the magic *Eyes of Fear!*” shouted the Hero of Lightning. “If you meet his gaze, you’ll be stricken with terror and unable to move!”

It was too late, though.

“It’s over!” I declared, activating my eyes and flicking them up to meet his gaze. The mage stopped...or, he should have.

I felt a sudden reversal—for the first time in my life, *I* was afraid to meet another’s eyes. I couldn’t muster a proper word, just grunts from my throat.

Now I understood why he hadn’t responded to me, why he’d ignored my repeated attempts to exchange names on the battlefield. I had looked down

on him as livestock incapable of understanding the code of honorable combat; I had dismissed him as some barbarous fighter, not a true warrior. However, that was not the case.

His gaze... That pair of unaffected eyes... This human stared at me with the air of someone glancing at an insect crawling along the ground. Someone I'd seen as an enemy...saw me as nothing more than a pebble in his path. He had been uninterested in our fight. He...hadn't seen me as a threat.

I couldn't move. My flesh was being frozen by water magic. However, my body was undying, sustained by the blood provided to me by Lord Bifrons. None could kill me. It should've been impossible.

Still, my body was shaking.

I'm about to die. The absolute surety of that fear was wracking me. Suddenly, the man drew a dagger from his waist and lifted it to the sky.

"Eir... I offer this life to you."

The name he'd called was that of the Goddess of Water. But Lord Cain had killed her hero. Had the Hero of Water been reborn? This was far too soon!

Besides, the Hero of Water was always the weakest—the first to die.

So, you can't be the Hero of Water... Who...or rather, what are you?

My mind was spinning. I couldn't move at all. The small dagger pricked my huge frame. Immediately afterward, a dim light filled the area.

Out of nowhere, a horde of babbling babies appeared, small wings sprouting from their backs. They erupted in loathsome giggles, baring their teeth, and then...

They began to eat me.

"Graaaah!"

My scream was part pain, part fear. I was being eaten alive. My instincts were screaming too, and I knew—my soul was being devoured. It was over. Regardless of the blood from Lord Bifrons, I could not revive if my soul had been consumed.

"Momo, Abel, I'm done," the man announced. He turned back to his comrades and began to leave.

"W-WaIT!" I mustered the last of my strength to ask the question, and my voice came out halting and uneven. "WhO... WhaT ARE you?!"

"Oh? You can still talk?"

“Y...YeS...” Yet I knew that actual, meaningful words could not leave my throat.

This...was no hero. The heroes I’d faced had all been spurred on by strong emotions—a sense of justice, hatred for oppression, or maybe revenge for a lost loved one. This man was different. There was no justice. No hatred. No seeking revenge. He had...nothing. It was almost as if he felt like this whole situation was natural, like killing demons was no different from breathing.

He was a reaper...a reaper of demons.

Ah... Take care, My Lord. The damned goddesses have sent forth a dread assassin. Please, forgive me for falling here.

And there I fell, eaten at the hands of magic from a human I’d seen as nothing more than livestock.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

“Graaahaahhhgh!”

The demon’s last gasp echoed around the area.

Ugh, I want a blessing right about now. Actually, I thought this the last time I used your technique, but... Hey, Eir? Don’t you think this is kinda gross? A lot gross?

I half expected to hear her answer me, but there was no reply. Did her technique actually work?

The sight of the cherubs tearing the demon apart wasn’t something I particularly wanted to watch, so I’d looked away...but then, I felt my gaze pulled back. There was no trace of him left.

Yeah, he’s gone now. I brought my hands together. *Rest in peace.* That wasn’t a custom in this world, but still.

“Sir Makoto!”

The Grandsa— Well, *Momo* latched on to me.

“Momo, I got your revenge.”

“Th-That was incredible! Sir Makoto...I...I...” She squeezed me tighter and tighter. Now that she was a vampire, the Grandsage was really strong. I was struggling a bit to breathe.

“Makoto!” Abel’s flustered voice called out. “We can’t stay for long. Let’s get out of here!”

Right, Bifrons was in the castle, and we couldn't risk getting caught by Setekh. We'd be turned to stone in an instant and that'd be curtains for us.

So, I spread out the mist again and used *Stealth* to sneak away. We came across a few groups pursuing us, but I used elemental magic to fight them all off.

Once again, we'd successfully escaped Bifrons's human farm.

◇ Hero Abel's Perspective ◇

We kept running for the entire day. Things were different than last time, though. Now that Momo had been turned into a monster, she had far more stamina and didn't seem to struggle with the prolonged travel.

"G-Gimme a break..."

Makoto was the first to run out of energy. I...hadn't expected that. After all, he'd defeated the Demon Lord's right hand with such ease.

We walked for a while before finding a cave where we could take a break.

Makoto immediately flopped down to rest and Momo took up watch. In the meantime, I gathered some water and caught four fish.

When I returned, Momo eyed the fish and exclaimed, "Leave the cooking to me!"

I'd expected her to build a campfire, but instead, she used fire magic to heat up a stone, and she roasted the fish on top of it.

Huh... That made for less smoke than an actual fire. *It's a good method.* The pleasant aroma of cooking fish filled the cave, and I offered up some of the salt I had on me so Momo could season our meal.

"It's done, Abel. Sir Makoto, wake up."

"Thanks, Momo," I said.

Makoto stirred. Around a yawn, he mumbled, "Morning...Momo, Abel."

He and I quickly tucked into the fish. *Delicious.* I was able to savor the flavor all the more knowing that we'd actually survived. He had defeated Balam the Wonder...

As I was gazing at Makoto, I finally noticed what Momo was doing by his side.

"Aren't you going to eat?" I asked. She hadn't taken a single bite out of the meal that she herself had cooked.

“Um... I’m not hungry right now...” Momo answered weakly, her face pale.

Surely that wasn’t right? She’d been moving around so much—it didn’t make sense.

“Oh, I get it,” Makoto said, looking at her and immediately seeming to have a realization. “Here, you can drink my blood.”

Momo and I jumped at that.

O-Oh yeah! Momo’s a vampire, so she takes blood as her food.

“S-Sir Makoto! No, I can’t!” Momo’s face was even paler than before, and she was shaking her head.

Vampires couldn’t survive without blood. That’s just what it meant to be a demon. To the demons and monsters of the army, humans were food, which was why their kind and ours couldn’t coexist.

“I won’t drink blood! I won’t! So please...don’t throw me away...”

She was crying, utterly frantic. I felt a lump in my throat. I hadn’t realized how much she’d been worrying...

But Makoto didn’t seem bothered in the slightest.

“Don’t stress about it—just drink.” Makoto guided her mouth to his neck.

Whoa! That’s way bolder than I expected from you!

Momo let out a mewl. “Uh?! Sir Makoto?! You don’t mind me drinking blood?”

“Don’t let it bother you. You’ll collapse if you don’t get enough.”

“O-Okay... Uh, excuse me, then.”

Momo hesitantly allowed herself to draw closer, placing her arms over his shoulders. Her small lips met his neck, and Makoto let out a slight grunt. Her grip tightened suddenly, and her throat began to bob.

After a while, she pulled back with a sigh of contentment. She looked much less pallid now—her cheeks were slightly pink, and a look of ecstasy was plastered on her face.

“Sir Makoto...”

She remained close, straddling him, the rapturous look on her face. Her cute lips were reddened with blood, giving her young face an oddly alluring look.

Then, she moved those reddened lips toward Makoto’s...

Wait, what?!

I heard the soft sound of skin on skin, and then...

“Ow.”

Makoto flicked Momo on the forehead. She looked up at him in confusion, then flushed bright red.

“Wh-What did I just do?!” she blurted out.

“Ah, sorry, Momo. I still had *Charm* going.”

At that realization, Momo and I both gasped in shock.

“I need it for elemental magic,” Makoto explained. “But I’ve stopped now, so it should be fine.”

I sighed deeply.

“I’ve rested,” he continued, “so now it’s your turn, Momo. Once we get our strength back, we can keep going.”

“S-Sure... Um, Sir Makoto, are you sure I can stay with you? Even though I’m a vampire...?”

“Of course. Doesn’t bother me.” He glanced my way.

“I-I’m okay with it too, if Makoto is!” I was honestly a little scared of Momo now, but I could hardly tell her no.

“I’m so happy... Even though I’m like this now...” With a look of utter relief on her face, Momo soon fell asleep.

Guess she was actually really tired. More stamina or not, she’s still a child. I hadn’t even realized...

I glanced at Makoto, who was stroking her white hair. Just how relaxed was he?

“Don’t you need to rest, Abel?”

I shook my head. “I’m fine.”

“I see.”

Honestly, I hadn’t done anything. I’d expected to be able to help in some way, but ultimately, I’d been useless.

The two of us sat in silence. With nothing to do, Makoto used water magic to conjure several creatures, and he started to control them. Shoals of glittering fish swam in front of us. It was...incredible. Each and every tiny fish was moving as if it were alive. Their scales gleamed and their fins fluttered. Even their eyes moved.

How much concentration must it take to keep such a detailed spell active?

I looked at his face. He didn’t gaze back but was instead staring at

Momo with an expression of almost brotherly concern.

I'll never measure up. He's just too incredible.

Honestly, I'd thought that rescuing her from the castle would be impossible. I'd assumed that Makoto was being reckless. Now that it was over though, it was like he'd just strolled off to save her and had coincidentally put the demon lord's subordinate in the ground. He was like a hero.

That's it—Makoto is the very image of a hero that my teacher always tried to instill.

"Makoto...how can you do all of this?" I found myself asking.

"Huh?"

"I'm...a worthless hero. Althena granted me the Hero of Lightning skill, but I've been no use at all. I'm the weakest out of all of the heroes in Labyrinthos. Even my mentor was killed by Cain...killed instead of me..."

I realized that tears were trickling down my cheeks. How pathetic could I be?

"I shouldn't be alive... My mentor...the Hero of Fire...should have survived instead." I hated my weakness all the more in the face of Makoto's accomplishments. Tears and complaints were the only things I could muster.

For the entire time I wept, Makoto didn't say anything. When I looked up, I found him gazing steadily back at me. It...didn't *look* like he was disappointed to hear such unheroic words coming from me. However, I couldn't tell what was going through his mind behind the blank look on his face. If I had to guess, I'd say he seemed almost surprised.

I hunched over in embarrassment. "Makoto, pardon me for saying all of that. You should join Volf and Julietta's party when we get back to Labyrinthos. Honestly, I'm not cut out to be a hero. I'll just drag you down."

"Abel, that isn't true at all," he said, trying to console me.

That didn't mean anything, though.

"It's fine," I insisted. "I could never fight against the demon lords—"

He quickly cut me off. "Abel...I should tell you exactly what my mission was."

That was an odd statement. I was sure he'd already told me. I even remembered his words.

"Your mission...was to save the heroes, right?" I asked. "That's why you

risked your life at the castle—to save Volf and Julietta.”

His answer came, simple and direct. “No.”

I’m wrong? What in the world is his mission?

“The goddess sent me to help *you*.”

“Wha...?”

I couldn’t understand. *What did he just say?*

“The mission Althena gave me was to ‘save Hero Abel.’ That’s why I’m here—to help you.”

My mind went completely blank. He continued to hold my gaze.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

There was a long silence.

“Wha? How...? Me?”

Though Abel’s mouth was open for a good ten seconds, no words came out. So, I spoke first. “That’s how it is. I look forward to working with you.”

The silence dragged on for a while. Eventually, he gave a clumsy nod. “R-Right. Likewise.”

Great, at least I have his agreement. I’m in his party now!

I glanced down at the Grandsage—Momo—as she slept in my lap. She was one of Abel’s *real* companions, so she should stay with us. Other than that, there was the saint, Anna, along with Johnnie Walker, Lucy’s great-grandfather.

Just then, I had a sudden thought. *How long can I stay with him?*

“Sir...Makoto...” I heard Momo mumble in her sleep.

Well, I wasn’t going to leave her behind, so at least for the time being, I’d stay with them.

Oh, actually...I almost forgot about Ira. The goddess had told me to seek her out in this era. Maybe she could give me some advice. After all, she *could* see the future. Though, I still wasn’t entirely sure. Her predictions were sometimes kinda...eh.

I looked over at Abel and found him resting against the wall—he’d dozed off. *Must have been more tired than he’d let on.*

Calm Mind.

My skill shook off any traces of tiredness as I kept watch. Fortunately,

no one showed up while the others were asleep.



After seven days of travel, we reached Labyrinthos.

Whew...it's so far away. Though last time, I guess we *had* used Fujiyan's airship. In this era, though, walking was the main method of transportation.

Abel was a hero, and he had the strength to go with it. Momo had become a vampire, so she had the stamina. It was all I could do to keep up with them.

"Makoto, we'll be at the entrance soon," Abel announced.

"Sir Makoto...are you okay?" asked Momo. "Shall I carry you?"

I didn't have the energy to respond. In the distance, I could see the entrance to the dungeon.

Labyrinthos. *It hasn't changed...*

Since I'd arrived in this time period, all sorts of things had been different, but Labyrinthos looked just the same as it had when I'd last visited. Honestly, I was feeling a little emotional about it. It was identical, though there was no town of adventurers and no roads.

Pushing through the greenery, we soon arrived at our destination.

"Wait here a bit," Abel said. "You can't see from here, but there are guards on duty. I'll go ahead and tell them about you first."

With that, Abel headed for the entrance. Momo and I were left alone.

"Sir Makoto... I'm a demon now, so can I really stay with you?"

"It's fine, all good. Just act like you belong and no one will notice. Abel said that, remember?"

The hidden home in Labyrinthos was host to more than just humans. There were elves, dwarves, and beastmen too. No vampires, though. But, because all sorts of different races were represented here, I figured that no one would look too closely.

Momo and I waited for a few minutes, and eventually, Abel returned.

"Makoto, Momo, I'll lead the way."

"Wow... It's amazing." Momo marveled.

You couldn't tell from the outside, but there was a town set up around the paths through the upper layer. It'd probably been built with magic, but

the stone buildings stood regardless. There were a lot of people living here. Humans, elves, beastmen, and other races I'd never seen before. The common feature among them was that everyone was armed. The whole town could fight, it seemed.

"Makoto! Momo!" an elf woman shouted, running up and hugging us. She was wearing green armor and looked almost completely different from the last time we'd met...but I still recognized her.

"Julietta, I'm glad you got here safely," I said.

"I was so worried. Oh, hang on. Momo, you..."

Huh, she noticed Momo's changes right away.

"Julietta, how about we talk over here?" I suggested.

Once we'd moved away from the crowd, I explained what'd happened.

"What?!" Julietta was wide-eyed, her hand pressed over her gaping mouth. "So the demon lord sired you...but Makoto cut the thread of fate?!"

"I can still hardly believe it...and I *watched* it happen," Abel said.

"Makoto is just beyond normality."

"Who are you, Makoto?" asked Julietta.

"Just a normal person given a mission by Althena," I explained. Neither of them seemed convinced. *It's not like I'm lying, though.*

"Well, whatever. We should tell Volf. We can hide Momo being a vampire from everyone else. By the way, Makoto, what are the two of you planning now?"

"Well, I want to rest for a while..." My legs were *killing* me.

Momo agreed, apparently. "I'm staying with Sir Makoto."

"Got it. Abel, the room next to yours is free. Think we can put them up there?" She paused for a moment. "Wait, sorry. We don't have much space, so you two will have to share a room..."

So both Momo and I will have to use the same room.

"You good with that, Momo?"

"Of course! Couldn't ask for better!"

I stared at her oddly. "Okay, then." *At least she doesn't have a problem with it.*

"I'll show you the way," Abel said, taking the lead.

Before long, we reached a simple stone housing complex.

"No one is using this room now," he told us. "Make yourselves at home."

He left Momo and I alone. The space was small, with only a plain bed and table.

“Momo, you use the bed,” I offered.

I looked around, trying to decide where to sleep, and spotted a small hand mirror on the floor. I picked it up and turned it over. “Olga” was engraved on the back. It was a familiar name.

I opened up *The Legend of Hero Abel*.

Abel’s mentor had been the Hero of Fire, Olga. She was famous. *This must be the namesake of General Talisker’s daughter.*

And yet, just recently, she’d passed away. I could understand why Abel had looked so depressed earlier.

So this was his mentor’s room... I felt bad for taking it.

“Sir Makoto?” Momo asked, looking worried about how I’d suddenly fallen silent.

“Sorry, my bad. You can go to sleep first.”

“Um... I feel bad taking the bed all to myself, so...” She smiled hesitantly. “Would you like to share it?”

The bed was rather small for two people.

“It’s fine,” I said. “I’m used to sleeping on the floor.”

“B-But if you hold me, we can sleep in it together!”

“Some other time.”

I wanted to fall asleep quickly, so I just lay down on the floor. Momo got into the bed.

“O-Okay.”

This was the first time I’d been indoors for a long while, and as a result, I got a decent night’s sleep.

“Sir Makoto, Lady Momo! You *are* both safe!”

“We don’t have much, but we owe you our lives, so eat your fill!”

Julietta had woken us up that morning and brought us to the cafeteria.

Apparently, this was the only place to eat in the whole town. Volf was wearing armor and there was a massive battle-axe resting against his chair. *So that’s his primary weapon.* The room was packed with other fighters as well. It felt kinda similar to the bar in the Macallan guild. After venturing a thousand years into the past, I’d finally found somewhere exciting.

“By the way, Momo.” Julietta cocked her head. “You have a lot more

mana now than when we first met. Have you gotten Abel to use *Appraisal* on you?”

“No. We haven’t had the time.”

“I see. You should investigate, I think.”

“Um...” Momo mumbled. “But I don’t have any impressive skills.”

“Momo, a human becoming a vampire is similar to being reincarnated—you get stronger and can acquire different skills.”

Makes sense. Momo is the Grandsage, after all.

“Okay then,” Abel said. “Look into my eyes, please.”

“S-Sure.” Nervously, she met his gaze.

“Your race...is half vampire. I guess you weren’t turned completely. Your stats are amazing. Well, it *was* the demon lord who turned you. As for skills... Huh?”

“What’s up, Abel?” Julietta asked.

“What is it?”

Abel had just stopped partway through reading off the appraisal.

“Momo...has the *Sage* skill.”

“Wha?!” Julietta and Volf exclaimed in unison.

“Is that a good thing?” Momo asked.

“It is! Apparently, only one in a million have that skill!”

Julietta shook her head in awe. “I’ve never seen it before...”

“Makoto, you don’t seem surprised,” Abel pointed out.

As other heroes were raving, I was just sipping at my ale. *Crap. I already knew, but not being surprised looks dodgy.*

“Man, that’s amazing, Momo!” I purposefully exclaimed. “Good for you!”

“Um... Sir Makoto? Does having the *Sage* skill mean I can help you?”

“Hm?” I didn’t expect *that* as a response to my blatant acting. Well...to be honest, I kinda wanted her to use it for Abel rather than me.

“So, what’re the two of you doing next?” Julietta asked me. “If you like, you can st—”

A sudden bellow cut her off.

“The chief is back!”

“The great warriors have returned from the depths of Labyrinthos!”

“Greet them!”

“Looks like their hunt was plentiful!”

All the exclamations were coming from the crowd around us, a gathering of elves and beastmen. What was going on?

“Oh, he’s back.” Julietta scowled.

Volf snorted at her. “You don’t need to pull that face.”

“He doesn’t show any interest in defeating the demon lords, even with all of his strength. If he’d helped, Olga might not have—”

“Enough, Julietta. Regrets of the past help no one.”

“That’s right, Julietta. He’s not a hero, so...”

No one looked happy. Momo and I exchanged glances.

Abel hurriedly spoke to us. “Sorry, Makoto. We shouldn’t have brought that up...”

“It’s fine. Would you mind telling me what’s going on, though?” After all, if I was going to be living here, I wanted to know what I was getting into.

“There are several factions in this town,” Abel explained. “We make up one of them—our faction was centered on the Hero of Fire. Opposing us, there’s the faction led by the Hero of Iron. Their goal is survival rather than defeating the demon lords. In other words, they won’t fight them at all.”

“They won’t fight the demon lords...even though they’re heroes?”

“Well, strictly speaking, they gave up after previous attempts. Currently, the Hero of Iron’s faction has more members than ours...”

So the majority had given up.

Julietta continued the explanation. “There is one last faction...” she pointed to the crowd of elves and beastmen, and the “chief” who’d just returned. “The ones who built this town. It’s the largest faction, and they’re mainly made up of demi-humans. Elves like me, dwarves, and beastmen. They’ve lived here the whole time.” She drained her ale with gusto.

“They sheltered human heroes like us here,” Volf added.

“I see.”

At least now I understood the dynamics at play. I hadn’t realized Abel would be part of the smallest faction. Frankly, I’d expected everyone in this hideout to be on the same page...but apparently not. *Things aren’t going to be easy...* Keeping Abel safe had been a huge relief, but there was still a long way to go.

A tall man slipped from the throngs of people. The rest followed after. *So he’s the leader, the chief of the demi-human faction.* The man had brown

hair tied roughly into a ponytail and a long sword strapped to his back. The people around him tried to strike up a conversation, but he didn't seem interested at all and just kept on walking. His face looked like it was carved from stone, and his expression communicated that everything was just a bore to him.



“That’s him. The elf warrior, Johnnie. He’s the person who united all of the demi-humans.”

“Wha?!”

That was Johnnie?

I’d found Lucy’s great-granddad.

Chapter 3: Makoto Takatsuki Fights a Demon Lord

Johnnie Walker was Lucy's great-grandfather, and therefore Rosalie's grandfather. Putting it like that made him sound familiar and approachable, but *The Legend of Hero Abel* didn't include many depictions of him. For example, the book didn't say anything about how he'd teamed up with Abel's party—Johnnie just appeared in the story around halfway through. Because of that, I frankly hadn't expected to meet him so soon.

It is convenient, though, I thought.

The four who'd defeated Iblis were the Hero of Light, the Saint, the Grandsage, and the Spellbow—Abel, Anna, Momo, and Johnnie. I'd learned bits and pieces of the story at the Water Temple, and without a doubt, Johnnie Walker was the most important of that group. *And I know where he is and that he's safe.* I'd already teamed up with Hero Abel and the Grandsage, Johnnie was in my sights, and now, I only needed to find Saint Anna.

But there's a pretty big problem with that...

According to the legend, Hero Abel and Saint Anna were childhood friends, born and raised in the same village. In other words, they should *already* be in the same place. Despite that, I'd yet to hear the name Anna from anyone's lips. Not Volf, Julietta, nor even Abel himself.

She hasn't died like the Hero of Fire, has she...? I wondered, before purposefully shaking the question off. It was too soon to make that kind of assumption. The picture book didn't mention anything about Abel being captured in Bifrons's Castle, so I figured I should just assume that history had already changed.

I'm sure that Saint Anna's off safe somewhere...

Or so I hoped, anyway.

I thought I might be able to sound out Julietta, the Hero of Wood, but...if I revealed too much knowledge from the future, she could potentially

become suspicious of me. Just suspicion would be one thing, but if I actually admitted to being from the future, everyone here would probably just think I was crazy.

Guess I'll have to leave the mystery of Saint Anna unsolved for now.

Either way, Johnnie Walker—the legendary Spellbow—was here. Though, now that I'd gotten a good look at him, he seemed more like a swordsman. Indeed, a sword hung from his waist, but I didn't see a bow anywhere.

He was currently eating while surrounded by a throng of people, which was a testament to just how influential he was in this town. On top of that, he was one of Abel's true comrades against Iblis.

It would be best to get familiar with him. Maybe I should go introduce myself?

"I'll be back in a few," I announced.

"Huh? Where are you going?" Momo asked me.

Volf gave me a questioning look. "Sir Makoto?"

"I thought I'd give my greetings to Johnnie," I replied.

"Huh. You're a funny one," said Julietta. "He's not exactly friendly. Especially with men."

"He's...not?"

Well, he *was* famous for being a womanizing hero, so maybe that made sense. Still, nothing could happen unless I tried to open a dialogue.

I slowly wandered my way over to the big table where he was eating. There were a lot of women around him. Some were beautiful elves; others had sleek cat ears or adorable bunny ears. All of them were drinking and laughing. The general noise of their chatter and giggling as they poured drinks for each other...almost reminded me of Sakurai's group back in junior high.

Hang on—hadn't I made it this far in life by staying *away* from the extroverts?

Beyond all of that was Johnnie, the center of the group. He was drinking, but with an awfully bored look on his face.

I'd need to summon quite a lot of courage to break into the conversation. *But if I can't...*

After some back-and-forth with myself, I felt someone clap me on the shoulder.

“Hey, mister, you’re the guy that saved Volf and Julietta, aren’t you?”

I turned around to see a well-built guy with dark facial hair. Taking in his appearance as a whole, I figured he was probably a dwarf. His face was severe, but so was the aura enveloping him. Judging by his looks, he was a veteran warrior.

“I’m Makoto,” I replied. “Nice to meet you.”

“I’m the Hero of Iron, Deckel. Good to meet you too.”

Ooh! The Hero of Iron!

As far as I’d heard, this was one of the other faction’s heroes. He seemed really strong, and I sensed a fair bit of mana on him as well. He certainly didn’t *look* like someone who’d given up on fighting the demon lords.

I took his offered hand and shook it. “I hope we get along.”

“Volf talked you up...but you don’t look that strong!” he exclaimed before suddenly breaking into hearty laughter.

I sighed. Well, I was used to being seen as weak.

“Say, you shouldn’t have too much to do with them,” Deckel continued. “They said they’re planning on challenging the demon lord again. Honestly, considering that not even Olga could do much, their whole rebellion’s nothing but a pipe dream.”

“Umm...”

“Besides, I’ve got a seven-year-old little girl. I need to be around when she grows up! I can’t just be fighting recklessly! Don’t you think?”

“You’ve got a daughter...?”

Ah. He wasn’t against fighting because he lacked courage. Sometimes strong people had others—like family—whom they wanted to protect.

“You’ve got a little sister of your own, right?” Deckel asked.

“Huh?” *A sister? But I’m an only child.*

“Sir Makoto?” Momo’s voice chimed in by my side. She must’ve come over to see what the commotion was about.

“See, right there.” Deckel gestured to Momo. “Your little sister! She’s adorable.”

So he’d assumed that Momo and I were related...even though we looked nothing alike. Also, what kind of sister called their brother “sir”?

“Hey, Deckel, don’t start trying to win over Makoto!” Julietta exclaimed. “We’re going to take on the demon lord!”

Guess she came over with Momo.

Deckel scoffed. “You say that, but you nearly didn’t make it back this time. You should just quit while you’re ahead.”

“No way! If the heroes give up, the world will end!” Julietta insisted.

Just as their words were about to become an argument, Volf walked over and attempted to mediate. “Come on, both of you, calm down.” Abel was with him but didn’t join in. He just watched us as we spoke.

Deckel and Julietta both turned simultaneously to me.

“Why not just give up on defeating the demon lord?”

“Makoto, we should fight the demon lord, right?!”

I tilted my head. Defeat the *demon lord*? Singular? Surely they weren’t only talking about Bifrons. That wasn’t the whole point of their rebellion...was it?

“Well, we should be defeating the *Great Demon Lord*, right?” I asked.

Silence. Everyone present was gaping, mouths open in shock. All around us, conversation had stopped—the whole room was staring at me.

“Come on, mister. That’s a bit much...”

“R-Right. Iblis is a god, that’s just...”

Huh? Wait... None of the heroes were trying to defeat Iblis? *Maybe I shouldn’t have answered like that.*

Suddenly, a group of beastmen got up from Johnnie’s table and approached us.

“Human heroes,” said one of them. “Getting excited is one thing, but this is *our* town. If you’re going to drag us into conflict, you can leave.”

“Fighting the demon lords is a fool’s errand,” said another. “Don’t even consider it. After all, humans are weak.”

“Besides, forget the demon lords, Great or otherwise—you ain’t even defeated their subordinates.”

“Free the humans from the farm before you start talking nonsense.”

The aura around each of the men spoke to their strength. The Hero of Iron and the Hero of Wood both wore awkward expressions. *Heroes really do have a low position in the pecking order around here.*

Then, two people stepped forward.

“Makoto actually has defeated one of them—Balam the Wonder!”

“That’s right! Sir Makoto is very strong!”

Abel and Momo.

The other heroes all looked taken aback. *Ack, I really wish they hadn't said that!* I didn't want to make a name for myself here... I'd have to tell those two to keep stuff to themselves next time.

"You defeated Balam the Wonder?" one of the beastmen asked.

"Eh, well," I muttered reluctantly. "Yes, technically..."

"How do you expect us to believe that?!"

"You look like a stiff breeze'd do you in."

"Balam was the most senior of Bifrons's generals."

"Right. You can prove it against me. I'm Johnnie's right hand!"

This is getting rather annoying.

"Hey, hey," Julietta protested. "Makoto's only just gotten back from a long journey."

One of the beastmen scoffed. "He's supposed to be some bigshot who took down a high-level demon. A fight with one of us should just be a warm-up to him."

That guy's really hot-blooded. He sorta reminded me of Gerald, to be honest. And actually, aurawise, he was really strong. I was just trying to think up something that might get me out of fighting when a pale-faced man came rushing in.

"W-We're under attack!" the man yelled.

"Under attack! Everyone hurry!"

The whole town erupted. Volf and Julietta's expressions changed—the beastmen and the Hero of Iron became deadly serious as well. Everyone put their hands on their weapons.

"Come on, calm down. The chief's here."

"What is it? A dragon? A demon?"

"Don't look so pathetic, Sir Johnnie is here..."

A lot of elves and beastmen seemed to have faith in Johnnie's strength. However, the next words out of the lookout's mouth changed all that.

"A-A demon lord! Demon Lord Cain is here!"

The cry of despair echoed all across the dungeon town.

Demon Lord Cain. It went without saying, but this was Noah's disciple from the current era. Wicked Deity's Follower, the Black Knight, Mad Hero... Demon Lord Cain had a lot of (rather ominous) nicknames. Yet the one most often used was "Hero-Killer."

In *The Legend of Hero Abel*, most of the heroes were killed by Cain.

And right now, there were several heroes in Labyrinthos. The situation was bad...and getting worse...

“Demon Lord Cain!” Abel bellowed. His voice was raw, completely unlike his normal tone, and he suddenly leaped outside. Cain had killed Abel’s mentor, the Hero of Fire, so of course Abel felt his rage boiling over. However, he was also forgetting himself and focused only on his fury.

Th-This is bad!

“Abel, wait!” Julietta called.

“We’re coming with you!” Volf shouted as the two of them rushed after him.

“Papa!” came the cry of a small girl.

“You evacuate into the dungeon with the others,” Deckel told her.

“No! Not without you!”

“I’m a hero too. I can’t run away.”

“Promise me you’ll come back!” the girl insisted. “It’s my birthday tomorrow!”

“Of course. We can celebrate when I’m back.”

“You have to...”

This conversation between father and daughter was, well... *Could you both stop it with the death flags?!* In that moment, I promised myself I’d protect Deckel.

Then, a gruff voice spoke up. “Have the citizens evacuate. Women and children first. Anyone that can fight, come with me. We will drive him off.”

“Sir Johnnie! We can’t! That’s Demon Lord Cain!”

“We should all run!”

Johnnie Walker, the eye of the storm amid all this chaos, shook his head. “The heroes won’t cope on their own. We won’t be reckless. Come with me.”

So his faction was going to fight too.

“S-Sir Makoto?” Momo asked, tugging hesitantly at my sleeve. I honestly wanted her to evacuate, but I was scared of getting separated from and then losing track of her. I *really* didn’t want her to get abducted again.

“You come with me,” I said. “But if we start to fight, you need to hide.”

“R-Right!”

The two of us followed the crowd outside. As I stepped across the threshold, shrill laughter grated at my ears.

“Volf!” I heard Julietta scream.

Volf’s armor was broken, and he was bleeding freely.

H-He can’t be...

“Keep calm...Julietta... I’m alive...”

Phew. What about Abel, though?!

“Geh?!”

There—he was prone on the ground some distance away. *Cain must’ve gotten to him already.* I couldn’t see any bleeding though, so I hoped he’d just been knocked out.

“Momo! Check on Abel.”

“G-Got it!”

With Momo tending to Abel, I could observe the situation as a whole. Various beastmen and elves were lying on the ground covered in blood. Only a few minutes had passed since we’d even learned about the attack.

I spied a figure staring haughtily at us over the devastation—a knight clad entirely in pitch-black armor. He had a full-face helmet, so I couldn’t see his expression. There was a massive greatsword in his hands though, and he gave off immense amounts of aura.

Demon Lord Cain.

“Ga ha ha ha ha hah!” he guffawed. “Weak, weak, weak, weak, weak! You heroes of the Sacred Deities are *nothing!*”

An annoying demon lord... *I suppose he’s a talkative one.*

“The heroes will die! All others will be allowed to live as long as they pledge themselves to Noah. On your knees, now! Praise her! If you do, I’ll let you live with only a missing arm! Be grateful for our Lady Noah’s compassion!”

Come on...

Noah could only gain a single disciple every decade—that was one of the restraints put upon her. He could throw around as many threats as he liked, but it wouldn’t gain Noah any more believers. It would, however, definitely ruin her reputation.

Of course, no one answered him.

Elementals, elementals, I called out, gathering mana.

“Water Magic: Rain of Ice Lances.”

At my word, several hundred spears of ice rained down on Cain. Yet they all broke apart on his armor, not even leaving a scratch.

Yeah... Noah was right about that armor.

I thought back to what she'd told me just before my journey through time.



I was in the cathedral, almost ready to depart. Right next to us, Ira was chanting the incantation for the time travel miracle. All we could do at the moment was wait for her to finish, so Noah was using the time to get me up to speed on info from the past.

"Do you know which demon lord you need to be the most careful of?" she asked. She'd bothered to change into her teacher outfit. *Noah sure likes those clothes...*

"Iblis, right?"

She shook her head. "Nope. Iblis doesn't leave Eden, the fortress floating over the demon continent. As long as you don't seek him out, you won't run into him."

Oh, I wouldn't?

"Then I guess...Bifrons? He ruled over the western continent."

"He's dangerous too, but the correct answer is—"

"Demon Lord Cain," Althena interrupted. "He was Noah's disciple and a particularly widespread problem. If you are accompanied by heroes, there is a significant possibility of encountering him."

"Hey! Don't cut me off!" Noah protested.

"Demon Lord Cain..." I mused. He was the legendary hero-killer, and my predecessor...at least in regards to being Noah's believer. What kind of person was he?

As if to answer exactly that, Noah proudly continued her lecture. "I gave him a full set of plate armor *and* a greatsword—both made out of the same material as the dagger I gave you!"

Althena's eyes widened. "Hold it right there. I didn't have many believers back then, so I'm not exactly familiar with the situation, but...you *gave* him something like that?!"

Guess it was Althena's turn to be unhappy.

I glanced down to the dagger at my waist. His things were made from the same glowing blue magic material as this?

“Noah! I can’t... You used Cronus’s all-severing sickle?! And then you gave it to someone in the mortal realm?! What were you thinking?!”

“Oh, shaddap! Your *Hero of Light* skill was even worse, so who cares?!”

“My skill isn’t invincible! There has to be *sunlight*! I followed the laws when I made it! But those weapons of yours... You thoughtless relic!”

“Who’re you calling thoughtless?! Those laws are...well, they’re annoying! I just decided to wing it!”



The people in the cathedral startled backward at the sudden yelling match between the goddesses.

“Um...I apologize for interrupting your excitement,” I interjected politely, “but what kind of person was Cain?”

The two turned away from each other to face me instead.

“Makoto Takatsuki...” Althena began, her tone grave. “Listen calmly. The metal that makes up Cain’s equipment comes from the previous godking’s sickle. In other words...”

Althena paused to consider her phrasing, and Noah finished for her. “It’s invincible to physical and magic attacks.”

“Huh?”

What did she just say? Immune to physical and magical attacks? Doesn’t that make him unbeatable?

“Noah, you have to give him the proper details,” Eir said from the sidelines. “Mako, it’s actually only invincible against saint rank skills and under.”

Still...

“Doesn’t that make him unbeatable?” I asked.

“Nope. A divine rank attack or anything equivalent should work.”

“Say, for example...an attack from the Hero of Light,” Noah finished.

So no one besides the Hero of Light could beat Cain.

“Then what should I do if I have to fight Cain before I find the Hero of Light?”

“Run,” Althena said firmly. “You have no other choice.”

“That’s...all I can do?” *Oh well. Guess trying to fight someone with hacks like that isn’t going to work. I’d definitely lose.*

“Hmm...” Noah thought for a moment. “On the off chance you *do* have to fight Cain when the Hero of Light isn’t there, I should tell you how to deal with him.”

“There’s a strategy?” I asked.

“It’s not easy, okay?” Noah said, launching into her explanation. “Look, you have to...”



The “off chance” huh?

Noah probably knew this would happen.

Undyne, come here, I called.

I'd been requesting her for a while, but she wasn't showing up. Maybe I'd been leaning too heavily on her lately. I'd need to get back into her good graces later.

As I was trying to summon Undyne, the fighters were falling like dominos.

"Water Magic: Water Dragon!" I called, pulling mana from the water elementals. The spell didn't seem to even register to Cain, though—he didn't look my way.

"Guah!"

Ack! That was the Hero of Iron! Crapcrapcrap!!!

"Guh... I wanted...to celebrate her...seventh birthday..."

He was way too quick on the flags! *You're giving up too soon!*

"xxxxxxxx! (Undyne!)" I yelled angrily in Elemanti. Finally, she showed up...in a maid outfit.

"xxxxxxxx! xxx! (Sorry to keep you waiting! My liege!)"

"xxxxxxxx...? (What are you doing...?)" I asked after a moment.

"xxxxxxxx? (I thought you'd like this outfit. Don't you?)"

As she spoke, she glanced at Momo. Speaking of, Momo was still looking after Abel, and he'd now regained consciousness. Undyne couldn't have been taking so long because she was imitating Momo...right?

"xxxxxxxx... (You're being...)"

Too carefree for such an emergency.

"xxxxxxxx? xxxxxxxx? (A-Are you angry? My liege?)"

Her eyes began to well up with nervous tears. She looked almost exactly like Noah did when she pulled out the crocodile tears. *For the love of...*

No, calm down. You need her help to get through this.

Elementals were capricious and flighty—they needed to be in a good mood to help out. This was the fundamental truth of elemental magic. Which meant that my answer should be...

"xxxxxx, xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx. (Undyne, that outfit really suits you.)"

"xxxxxxxx?! (Really, my liege?!)"

"xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx? (You're very cute. Undyne, would you help me?)"

"xxxxxxxxxxx! (Of course, I'll do my best!)"

As soon as that cheer left her mouth, all of the mana in the area began to gather around me. It started to rain, and the earth shuddered. The air itself shook—the undulating black clouds sparked with lightning.

Undyne was gathering all of the water mana in the world.

Finally, Demon Lord Cain looked my way.

He had his sword raised, ready to finish off Deckel, but he stopped in his tracks. Cain had shown no concern toward me thus far, but now he was clearly examining me. Was it because he could see Undyne at my side?

He spoke quietly.

“Are you a hero?”

“No, I’m not,” I answered immediately. I was technically a State-Authorized Hero, but Roses didn’t exist in this time period. That meant I wasn’t actually a hero.

He seemed to ponder my response for a moment and then he spoke once more.

“Will you...put your faith in Noah?”

I couldn’t answer. I had no words with which to respond.

My faith still *did* belong to Noah. But I wasn’t her believer in this era, so I couldn’t say anything. Surprisingly, I became rather angry at that fact.

“If you cannot, then die,” he declared, having taken my silence as a refusal. He swung his sword, instantly closing the distance between us.

He was fast!

“*Water Magic: Barrier (Saint Rank)!*”

“It’s pointless! Ah ha ha ha hah ah ha ha!”

The demon lord tore through my barrier like paper, cackling all the while. With that shield gone, I had no other choice.

Right Arm of the Elemental.

Light flashed blindingly as my arm transformed into an elemental.

“Hm?”

The light pinpointed gaps in his armor—places an attack could slip through like a needle.

Then, a quiet voice sounded in the air.

“*Elemental Magic: Wind Arrow.*”

Close to a thousand wind arrows rained down on Cain. Most of them were turned aside by his armor, but a few seemed to make it through the gaps and joints.

As the arrows pierced through, I saw flecks of blood on the black plate.
Amazing...

This was the strategy Noah had given me against Cain—the armor itself would stop all attacks, but I could target the gaps. *Wind Arrow* understood that.

Before anyone else could move, the caster of *Wind Arrow* moved to stand between Cain and me.

His long brown hair fluttered in the wind, and he was carrying a sword that I'd swear was longer than he was tall. *No...not just a sword*. There was a curve to it, and the metal seemed to ripple with a temper pattern.

A katana.

Standing before me was a long-haired swordsman with a lengthy katana. He looked almost like a samurai.

"Thank you, Johnnie," I said.

As I spoke, he moved just his eyes to regard me. "Undyne... I have seen them before, but never with someone like this."

So he *could* see her. Well, that made sense—he was an elementalist too.

"You should help," he said. "I want you to, actually."

I nodded. "Let's drive him off."

"Your name?"

"I'm Makoto."

"Johnnie."

"Right." Well, I already knew that. His name had gone down in history.

"*Rain of Wind Arrows*," he murmured, causing several hundred wind arrows to appear. The spell used the mana in the area, not Johnnie's own.

This was elemental wind magic. I couldn't fall behind here.

"xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx...xxxxxxxx. (Undyne...I'm counting on you.)"

"xxxxxxxx. (Of course, my liege.)"

At my command, hundreds of water dragons spun into the air around Cain. Not that he seemed to even consider them worth any attention...

I held Undyne's right hand and activated *Synchro*.

Water Magic: Abyss.

I summoned huge amounts of water and enveloped Cain, hoping to protect everyone from his attacks. Then, I exploited his weakness, the one Noah had told me about.

According to her, his armor stopped all attacks and magic. Additionally,

his sword could cut through anything. That meant attacking him directly was pointless. My target needed to be his *surroundings*, not him. So, I made the geography and environment work for me.

The water dragons and walls of water essentially created a sea around him. The huge mass of water absorbed Cain completely. This was frankly a waste of mana, but as long as Undyne was here, my mana was infinite. I could see Abel and the Grandsage gaping in the distance. Fortunately, Abel didn't seem majorly hurt. That was a relief.

"*Gather, Fire Elementals,*" I heard Cain mutter. His sword was engulfed in black flames. So he could use elemental fire magic... His sword tip meandered through the air before suddenly thrusting at me.

"*Rain of Ice Arrows.*"

"*Water Magic: Water Dragon.*"

Our spells crashed into Cain. His armor defended against everything, though our magic slowed him down.

"*Water Magic: Ice Barrier.*"

I cast a multilayered barrier—Cain cut through it contemptuously.

Hmm, nothing was working... Though I'd known that would be the case.

"*Water Magic: Ice Mass.*"

I launched huge chunks of ice at him, similar to Lucy's Meteo. They didn't hurt him, but they did ruin his footing.

"*Wood Magic: Grasping Vines.*"

Johnnie's wood magic spell wrapped the demon lord in vines. He just cut through them.

"*Rain of Stone Arrows.*"

Thousands of arrows, all made of rock, rained down on Cain. Johnnie was definitely versatile.

"*Water Magic: Water Gaol,*" I cast. I thought this might trap him, but Cain's greatsword tore through it pretty much as soon as it'd been summoned. That sword was definitely made out of the same stuff as my dagger.

Which meant...it could cut through anything in the world. *Man, this is annoying.*

"Sir Makoto," Johnnie asked. He was floating in the air, buoyed by air currents. "Do you know of any spell that might work?"

"None of our attacks will harm him. We should keep going like we are,

keeping our distance.”

He looked at me doubtfully. “But we are making no progress. I thought you might have an idea—”

“This is the best we’ve got,” I interrupted. “Our attacks won’t work, but if we get close, his sword will cut us down.”

“I see...”

Johnnie seemed disappointed but didn’t argue. Maybe he was hoping I had some hidden trump card. I felt kind of bad, but then I once more thought back to the conversation with Noah.



“So, Noah, what’s my strategy if the Hero of Light isn’t around?” I asked.

Noah giggled. “Well, you stay away from Cain and just buy time. He gets bored quickly—if he thinks he won’t be able to beat you, he’ll leave.”

“Can you really call that a *strategy*?” *It’s way more brute-force than I expected...*

“Also, attack him while he’s sleeping, maybe? He probably takes the armor off while he’s asleep.”

I paused. “Fine. So I won’t win if I try to fight him head-on.” *I’ll just have to pray that I don’t run into him.*

“Noah, can’t you give Makoto Takatsuki the same kind of equipment?” Althena asked.

Nice one!

“Well...nope! The dagger I gave him used up the rest of Cronus’s sickle. Also, Makoto doesn’t have the strength for that stuff anyway.”

“Ah... That’s right.” I couldn’t wield anything heavier than a dagger.

Althena slumped, then turned to me. “Makoto Takatsuki. Do your utmost to avoid encountering Demon Lord Cain.”

“O-Okay...”

Althena was emphasizing this so much—how terrifying must he be? Honestly, I was really curious about Cain now.



Now, back to the present.

The king and saint rank spells that Johnnie and I were shooting toward Cain weren't even scratching his armor, and the greatsword Noah had given him could cut through anything.

That OP bastard... Honestly, shouldn't *he* be the Great Demon Lord? How could Iblis be worse? I had no idea what we'd do if Iblis was as crazy as Alexander. If he was...humanity wasn't gonna win this war.

Cain charged straight at us like a bull.

He's not going to get hurt by any of our attacks anyway, so that's probably the most efficient choice.

"Undyne!" I called out. I activated *Synchro* and used her mana to construct a huge ice barrier. *Would it even slow Cain down?*

Johnnie followed up with a slash of his own. "*Wind Magic: Kamaitachi!*"

Our combination of spells diverted Cain's attack, and the man tutted scornfully. *He must be furious at his inability to land a hit. I wonder if he'll leave soon...*

"*Wind Elemental...*" I heard Cain murmur. A gust of wind threw a blast of dust into the air. Suddenly, I couldn't see him.

H-He's gonna play dirty like that?!

"Undyne!"

I braced for Cain's onslaught, layering barriers around me. He wasn't after me, though—he was rushing toward Johnnie.

Cain's even faster than before! Is he taking this fight seriously now?!

"Die, heretic." Cain was now right in front of Johnnie. His massive greatsword, which blazed with black flames, came arcing down at slaughtering speed.

That's not going to be dodgeable!

Two figures—red and black—crossed one another, obscured by the cloud of dust.

"Huh?"

I'd seen visions of Johnnie being cleft in twain, but instead, the elven swordsman had easily turned Cain's blow aside. A simple katana had parried the godking's relic? Johnnie was beyond impressive.

"That was close," Johnnie remarked in a casual tone. He readied his blade once again.

Wow...

If Cain's sword had struck true, the katana would have definitely shattered. Cain probably knew that as well—the hero-killer turned toward me, switching targets, and I felt his menacing aura.

“Water Elemental Unification,” I said, pushing mana from the elementals into my dagger. I slashed it horizontally through the air.

A huge arc of water wrapped around Cain, and the rushing sound filled my ears. That black armor was unaffected, though. My water arc broke apart a section of the dark clouds, allowing a shaft of sunlight to reach the ground.

Then, Cain came dashing toward me.

“Worthless! Die where you stand!”

Only a few steps separated the two of us.

Right Hand of the Elemental.

I braced myself, and then...

Someone appeared behind Cain, yelling and swinging a sword that glowed in a kaleidoscope of color.

Is that...Abel?

Cain noticed Abel and hesitated for a split second over whether to commit to attacking me. Ultimately, he decided to turn and deal with the hero first, slashing to counter Abel's sword strike.

Oh no! Is this where Abel falls?! Johnnie and I tried to cast a spell to help him, but...

“What?!”

Though the yell of shock had come from Cain, the rest of us were even more surprised.

Abel's sword had sliced through the demon lord's helm.

Wasn't that armor supposed to defend against everything?!

The helmet clattered across the ground. Blood welled forth from Cain's neck, but a scant instant later, the wound disappeared with a flash of light.

Oh. So Noah's armor also healed him. *Come on, goddess... That's not fair.*

Demon Lord Cain had dark skin and purple eyes—he was also shockingly handsome. However, those fine features were currently warped into a hateful scowl.

“You...defiled...the armor gifted to me...by Noah...”

“Rain of Wind Arrows.”

“Rain of Ice Spears.”

The spells Johnnie and I cast generated over a thousand elemental weapons, all leveled at Cain’s newly revealed head.

Yeah, get his weak spot!

“Tch!”

Cain seemed to realize his sudden disadvantage. Instantly, he scooped up the helm and flew away.

Ah! You took it with you?!

“Just you wait!” he yelled back at us. “I’ll offer your soul up to Noah next time!”

We made it... That was close—I had lost track of how many times I’d nearly died.

I dropped to my knees where I was.

“××××××××? (Um, my liege?)”

“××××××××, ××××××××. ××××××××, ××××××××. (Ah, sorry about that, Undyne. Thanks. You were a real help.)”

“×××! (Of course!)” She smiled happily before vanishing.

She seemed far more emotional now than the first time we’d met. Then again, I wasn’t sure if she was technically the same person I would meet (had met?) in the future.

Also, what was with all the “my liege” stuff?

Even though Cain was gone, I still needed to deal with all the water walls and dragons I’d conjured. I was tidying it all up with my magic when I noticed someone getting closer. *Maybe Johnnie? Wait, no...*

“M-Makoto...”

“Abel. Thanks for your help earlier.”

He meandered over to me, having just landed a real blow on Cain. It’d been incredible.

“Makoto, I’ll heal you,” he offered.

“I didn’t really get injured,” I half protested.

“But what if something happened?!” He ignored my words and cast a healing spell on me. *I only got scratched up a little, and nothing really hurts...* Regardless, I had more important things to ask him about.

“Abel, that technique you used was unbelievable. Is that a magic sword?” There was no doubt about it—his attack had been from the *Hero of*

Light skill set.

“I don’t know. I was barely even thinking. You pushed the clouds away, and I just felt like...like I was filled with strength the moment the sun shone through...”

“Huh...”

Right! Iblis’s *Clouds of Darkness* were constantly covering the sky in this time period, blocking the sunlight.

Is it that simple? I asked myself.

As I absently considered that, Abel’s expression fell to pieces. “Thank the gods... I thought all I could do was watch as he took away someone else I owed a debt to. I’m so glad you’re safe.” His voice shook, and his hand gripped my shoulder. His head was bowed, so I couldn’t properly see his face, but he might have been crying.

“Sir Makoto!” A young girl quickly ran over to us.

I nodded to her. “Momo.”

“Are you okay?! Were you injured?!”

“Nope. Abel healed me up just in case, but I’m not hurt at all.”

“Thank goodness... I’m so glad.”

The Grandsage wrapped her arms around my waist, hugging me tightly. I must have really worried her. I’d need to make up for that.

Meanwhile, Johnnie was surrounded by his own subordinates. A lot of his comrades were injured. Had they all pulled through?

Oh, he’s looking at me. My *Listen* skill picked up his faint words: “My thanks.”

Man, he was cool as a cucumber. *Lucy, your great-granddad’s a certified badass.* No wonder he was so popular.

What about the others?

Several healers were tending to the wounded. I looked around and saw that Julietta was nursing Volf. Deckel’s daughter was holding on to him and crying. *Whew, he made it. Guess we managed to knock down those death flags.*

I let out a massive sigh.

We’d somehow managed to get through Cain’s seemingly unstoppable assault.



“Hurry—we’re moving farther in.”

“Anyone healthy, help the wounded!”

“Wait! Have we secured somewhere safe in the middle layer?!”

“We’ve got a barrier up in a cave near the lake. It’s enough for us to evacuate to.”

“Isn’t that lamia, arachne, and harpy territory?”

“Trust the barrier! It’ll be fine...probably.”

“Oy, are you sure about that?!”

Currently, the people of the dungeon town were in the middle of a massive migration. The reason? Cain now knew of the town’s existence. They needed to relocate from the upper layer before the whole demon army arrived.

It was a real shame...

“Momo, let’s get going.”

“R-Right.”

Momo and I didn’t have many belongings—we practically only owned the clothes on our backs. I offered to help carry other things, but everyone turned me down with words like, “You must be tired from fighting alongside Sir Johnnie! You don’t need to worry about this stuff!” Also, since Momo was a child, she was exempt from carrying anything.

Even as we progressed farther into the dungeon, barely any monsters showed up. The mages had cast barriers on the paths. It was probably a real pain for the monsters...but it enabled us to safely arrive in the middle layer.

I heard the constant rumble of the waterfall impacting the lake. A small crack in the ceiling allowed a single shaft of light through, which gave the entire area an almost ephemeral feeling.

It’s really taking me back... This is where I met Sasa again.

As I was lost in my memories, Momo turned to me. “Sir Makoto, is something wrong?”

“Nah, it’s nothing. Let’s go find Abel and the others.”

The heroes had acted as a vanguard for the move, so Momo and I had come down separately from them. I was sure they’d been hurt...but well, I suppose it took more than that to bring down a hero.

I felt kind of bad that we were the only ones taking it easy. Volf and Abel were carrying heavy-looking luggage. They probably weren’t going to be free anytime soon.

Suddenly, a couple of girls I didn't recognize came up to me.

"Um, Sir Makoto?"

"Do you have a moment?"

The first was a black-haired elf. The other was a blonde girl with cat ears. Both of them were gorgeous.

"What is it?" I asked.

The two slipped closer, taking my hands.

"The chief wants to talk with you."

"We'll guide the way."

"The chief...?" I asked. "Oh, you mean Johnnie? Okay."

Johnnie was a key figure in my mission to the past, so I wanted to spend some time actually talking with him.

"Um..." Momo mumbled, placing a hand on the back of my shirt.

"Can Momo come too?" I asked the girls.

They hesitated for a moment, exchanged looks, and then agreed in unison.

I wonder what that's about...

They guided us into a big cave, perhaps excavated using magic. It was already set up to house people. As I walked, I used *RPG Player* to peer at the elf's face more closely.

She looks kinda like her...

The black-haired elf had features similar to Lucy. *Ah, but I guess Lucy is the only elf I'm somewhat close to. Maybe I just think they look alike because so many elves are attractive.*

While I was considering that, we arrived in a large stone room within the cave.

"Chief."

"We brought Sir Makoto."

A muffled voice called out from beyond the door. "Come in."

Is that Johnnie? It sounds like him.

The women opened the door, and we stepped inside.

"Huh?"

That was the first sound out of my mouth. Johnnie was sitting in a chair...with his shirt off. That in and of itself was fine. The real problem was behind him. There was a large bed...and the woman in that bed...

Naked!

Momo's mouth was hanging open as she gawked. *Ack, maybe I shouldn't have brought her.*

"I'm glad you're here," said Johnnie. "Take a seat."

I let out a hitched sigh and sat opposite him across the table.

"Pardon me," Momo said politely.

The women who'd escorted us here swiftly brought out food and drink and placed everything on the table.

"Go ahead and eat," said Johnnie. "It's not much, but it's a sign of my appreciation for your help."

"Well, I'm glad you were there too. I would've been killed otherwise..."

"You are not part of this town, and yet you risked your life to defend it. As its chief, I want to show my gratitude."

I let out another breath. "I appreciate it."

As far as Johnnie was concerned, he owed me for fighting for the town. I'd just been following my orders from Althena to protect the Hero of Light, but I guess it all worked out in the end.

"Demon Lord Cain—the hero-killer. Facing off against him made it clear...but I had not expected him to possess such abnormal strength..." There was a slight darkening to Johnnie's placid expression.

"Man, he's pretty much just cheating." *Of course, that's mostly due to Noah's relics. Come on, goddess! It's not fair to only give my predecessors the cool stuff.*

Johnnie nodded. "And yet you maintained your composure and calmly dealt with him. I was impressed."

"Thank you."

I didn't quite feel like I deserved the praise—after all, I'd been briefed ahead of time about his skills and equipment. I was essentially cheating too. If I hadn't known about Cain, and that had been the first time I'd experienced his power, I probably wouldn't have been able to deal. Cain was one of *those* bosses—one that totally wiped you out the first time through.

"Oh, Sir Johnnie, is he joining our family too?"

"Despite how strong he is, he's such a cutie."

The naked women spoke up from the bed. Huh...I guess there were *two* of them. Also...cover up...at least a little. I glanced over at Momo—her face was red and she was looking away.

She definitely seems embarrassed. Sorry, Momo.

“We’ve got guests. Get dressed,” Johnnie told them.

They chorused their agreement, and I drained my wine to shake away the intrusive thoughts. It was a strong drink that caught in my throat.

“Here, Sir Makoto,” said the black-haired elf, quickly refilling my glass. She got right in my personal space as she poured. I glanced toward her, and she smiled back.

Come on! You’re gonna give a guy the wrong idea with an expression like that...

“My daughter seems to have fallen for you after watching you fight. If she suits your fancy, would you consider taking her?” asked Johnnie.

I jolted. “Huh?”

“Whaaaa?!” Momo’s eyes were wide.

“Sir Makoto...” The elf girl gazed intensely at me.

She was Johnnie’s daughter? Wait, so that meant...she was one of Lucy’s relatives?! No wonder they looked alike!

“No fair! I want him too!” the blonde catgirl protested before throwing her arms around me.

“Ah, she is fond of you as well,” Johnnie explained. “You need not choose—you can marry them both.”

Wait, she was his daughter *too*?! I mean, Lucy had mentioned something like this...but how many kids did he *have*?!

The two cute girls got closer, breathing my name.

“These two are a strong mage and warrior, respectively. I think they’ll be a boon to you. Plus, they aren’t bad-looking, are they?” Johnnie continued, urging his daughters on.

“Well, their feelings would need to—”

They cut me off.

“I long for you, Sir Makoto.”

“I want you to take me...”

Johnnie nodded. “There you have it.”

Whoa, whoa, whoa! We only just met!

“There’s something I am always telling my children: you can die at any moment in this world, so if you find someone you have feelings for, do not keep them shut away.”

I let out another stuttering sigh. “I-I see...” That sorta sounded like

Rosalie's mantra. I guess it'd been passed down from Johnnie. Still...

"S-Sir Makoto...?"

Momo's eyes were watering as she tugged on my sleeve. *You don't need to look at me like that. I'm not going to marry someone from the past. Especially not one of Lucy's relatives from her grandmother's era.*

"I appreciate it, Johnnie," I said, "but I'll have to pass."

"Hm, I see..."

"Aww, no fair."

"Sir Makoto! I won't give up!"

He and his daughters seemed disappointed.

"Still, I do wish to show my gratitude for your aid," he insisted. "Is there anything else you want?"

Johnnie definitely had a strong sense of duty.

"I guess..." I thought for a moment. "Could you lend me a hand if I need it?"

"Me?" he asked, looking taken aback.

"Yes. I want your help."

"Well, I suppose..."

"Great! I'll come to you when I need assistance."

He nodded. "Very well."

Yes! I had a promise from him! Now I knew he'd help in the fight against Iblis.

"Though, I feel like I just made a deal with a devil..." Johnnie murmured after a moment.

"You're imagining things." *I'm not letting you take it back!*

The two girls were still trying to drape themselves over me. *Staying too long might be a bad idea.* I bid my farewells, and we left the room.

◇ Momo's Perspective ◇

"Sir Makoto!"

"Sir Makotoooo, can we talk?"

The chief's daughters and other women from the town were now constantly approaching him. Everyone seemed to be trying to curry favor. He *was* one of the heroes who had fought off that terrifying demon lord, so it made sense. And the women were all beautiful...with huge chests...

Ugh, he was going to end up with one of them at some point. *And if he does, I'll just be in the way.* I didn't think he would cast me aside, but I knew all too well that things would change.

I couldn't stop my spiraling thoughts and was only pulled out of my worries by the sound of his voice.

"What's wrong, Momo?"

His expression and voice were both calm, but despite that, his eyes were almost cold, like he was evaluating me. His gaze was always like ice, never wavering no matter what enemies attacked. I shuddered as those frigid eyes fell upon me.

Sir Makoto...I love you.

I wanted to stay with him forever. I never wanted to part from him. But how? How could I stay with him?

"Um...Sir Makoto?"

"Yeah?"

"Errr..."

What should I say? "Take me as your lover"? No, that wouldn't work. He'd say something like, "Maybe when you're older." He just thought of me as some child he had to look after.

"Sir Makoto!" I exclaimed, breaking out of my thoughts. "Take me... Take me...as your apprentice!"

"Huh?"

My request elicited a rare noise of shock from him.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

The Grandsage had become my apprentice... Like, what the hell?

"Sir Makoto! I'm looking forward to your instruction!"

"Y-Yeah..."

Hearing that from the Grandsage made me feel like I was going crazy. Although, in this era, Momo didn't have much fighting capability. Training her in magic wasn't a bad idea.

"Let's start by bumping up our magic mastery."

"Got it!" she exclaimed. "I'll train my *Water Magic* like you."

"Are you an idiot?! Water is the weakest of the seven elements! It comes last. Last!"

“Awww!”

She had the *Sage* skill, which let her use all of the elements, so why would she start with *water*? It was practically just a hobby.

“I wanted us to match...” she complained.

“I train my *Water*, *Sun*, and *Fate Magic* in turn. You should start with *Fire* and then *Ground Magic*.”

“Okaaay...” She agreed reluctantly.

Fire Magic excelled at offense, and *Ground Magic* was great for defense. There was no harm in mastering those two first.

Also...I was pretty sure the Grandsage was good with *Teleport*. I couldn't use it, though, so I couldn't teach her. *I wonder if there's anyone good with Fate Magic around here*. Actually...was I really coming up with the Grandsage's curriculum?!

Regardless of the oddities in my mind, we kept training together. Although, speaking of oddities, there'd been an unusual shift around town recently—I'd become really popular with women. They were being pretty blatant about it too.

One of the most persistent girls was the black-haired elf—the one similar to Lucy. But, I mean...she was one of Lucy's relatives. She was from the same generation as Lucy's grandfather, the village chief I'd met that one time in Springrogue. And apparently, she was only around fourteen... That was actually younger than me. She was Johnnie's daughter, though, so I couldn't reject her too harshly. Instead, I just vaguely pushed her away.

I was currently training my *Water Magic* by fishing in the underground lake. Momo was training next to me, a look of focus on her face as she produced four *Fireballs*. She was improving quickly. I guess that was a benefit of the *Sage* skill. A little ways away, Abel was keeping watch.

There was a magical barrier around us, and the heroes were on guard too, so no monsters were lurking anywhere. In other words, there was nothing for us to do.

Let's make sure the time isn't wasted.

“Come over here, Momo.”

“S-Sure.”

“Keep the *Fireballs* going,” I instructed as I watched her try to drop them. Keeping magic up all the time was a requirement for this type of training. Incidentally, I had 999 butterflies made of water magic fluttering

all around us. The Grandsage was going to be the best mage on the continent, so I'd have her doing the same sooner or later.

"Abel," I called out.

"What is it?" He looked my way with a smile.

Nice! I scored a load of relationship points! Wait...what am I on about?

"There's somewhere I want to go. Mind tagging along?"

"Sure, I can come. Where are we going?"

"Huh?" Momo looked between us, confused. "We're going somewhere?"

"To the deepest layer of Labyrinthos," I answered.

Momo and Abel let out overlapping gasps of shock.

Chapter 4: Makoto Takatsuki Meets the Holy Dragon

The three of us were traveling over the underground lake. I was using *Walk on Water* and *Flow*, so we were essentially skiing across the water.

“We’re going so fast!” Momo cheered.

“There are monsters behind us!” Abel warned.

“Hm?”

I turned around, and sure enough, sea serpents and kelpies were chasing us, looking primed to attack.

They wanted a race? I’d give them a race.

“I’ll speed up, then. Hold on tight, you two.”

Both uttered sounds of surprise.

Water Magic: WATER JET.

This was an original spell I’d made up just for fun. A second later, it felt like we were in free fall—a blast of water went off like a bomb, propelling us forward at crazy speed. We also opened up a lot of distance between us and the monsters. I could see them staring after us in bewilderment.

Momo and Abel’s screams echoed through the caverns.

“I thought I was going to fall off,” Momo complained once we’d arrived on the other side of the lake. “That was awful!”

“Makoto...was that much speed really necessary?” Abel asked pointedly.

“Ah, right. Sorry.” I’d made both of them angry.

We were now in front of a submerged cave. This entrance led deeper into Labyrinthos—my party hadn’t ventured this far the last time we were here. Actually, if I remembered correctly, this was the place where the blight dragons had emerged. *Man, that takes me back...*

“Hold my hands, you two,” I said.

“Right.”

“Got it.”

The two of them gripped my hands and I cast a spell, engulfing them both.

Water Magic: Water Breathing and Flow.

I also used *Stealth* to hide us as we progressed through the cave, and *Night Vision* was the only way to peer through the pitch-blackness.

All around us were a whole bunch of massive aquatic monsters. I spied a silhouette that looked around ten meters long... Was that a shark monster? I didn't care what a shark was doing in fresh water—there were some huge sea serpents and water dragons to worry about. We kept on swimming so that nothing had time to notice us.

“Um, Sir Makoto?” Momo asked. “Why did you suddenly want to get to the bottom of the dungeon?”

“I heard there were ancient dragons living down there. It's dangerous,” Abel warned.

Both of them were cringing away from the looming figures of the monsters around us.

“Well, you'll see when we get there,” I said vaguely.

Momo sighed. “All right...”

Obviously, I wouldn't take them somewhere this dangerous for no reason. I was after something specific.

I'd managed to remember a detail—a memory from right after I'd arrived in this world. Back then, I'd dedicated myself to reading through everything I could get my hands on in the Water Temple.

World of Adventure — Uther Mercurius Pendragon

That book had been written over a hundred years prior, and it was a record from a great adventurer. One day, after all my classmates had left me alone at the temple, I stumbled across it. I'd really enjoyed the book, and I'd read it over and over. The pages offered detailed information about many of the world's dungeons.

Of course, that included the largest one on this continent—Labyrinthos.

This excerpt came from a chapter about the western continent.



The great adventurer Uther visited Labyrinthos. His purpose was to catch a glimpse of the Holy Dragon Helemmelk, who had once flown

through the heavens with Abel the Savior.

A thousand years ago, Abel the Savior had met this holy dragon in the depths of Labyrinthos, and they had vowed to save the world together. True to their word, Abel the Savior defeated the demon lords astride the dragon's back.

Uther was awash with anticipation at the chance to meet the legendary holy dragon!

However...the holy dragon was nowhere to be found. Much like Abel the Savior, the dragon had also vanished.



If I'd searched for this holy dragon during my own time period, I wouldn't have been able to find it. However, I was now a thousand years in the past. Assuming the information in the book was true, I figured that the legendary dragon had to be here now.

It would definitely help the hero at my side!

Also...the only transport we had in this era was walking...which, considering my stamina, wasn't a great option.

I wanted *something* ASAP. That was why I was here. It went without saying, but I hadn't told either of the others. After all, I couldn't let them know I was from the future.

On another note, Uther had also challenged the Seafloor Temple. In other words, he'd visited all of the last dungeons in the world. He had this to say about the Seafloor temple.



The adventurer Uther attempted the Seafloor Temple.

He was...

...

...

...

...not successful. Time to give up.



C'mon, Uther, you could've put a bit more effort in.

That book had probably discouraged lots of people from venturing to the Seafloor Temple. Even *I'd* been against giving it a shot after reading about Uther's failure.

As I considered that, we slowly made our way down through the lower layer. The cave was dark and long. Just as I thought it was going to go on forever, it finally ended.

I bumped into a solid rock wall.

"A dead end?" I murmured. Apparently, I'd gone the wrong way.

"Doesn't look like we can go any farther," Abel said.

What a shame. It seemed like this was where our adventure would end.

But then, Momo spoke up. "Um, is there something over there?" She pointed at a corner of the cave.

Even with *Night Vision*, I could barely see. I used *Water Magic* to slowly guide us to the spot Momo was pointing at.

A transfer circle!

"Well spotted, Momo."

Abel shook his head in disbelief. "I couldn't see it at all."

Momo giggled shyly. "I guess my eyes are better now that I'm a vampire."

I inspected the circle closely. "The destination shouldn't be far from here. Judging by the distance, it'll probably transport us...to the next layer?"

"Makoto..." Abel said cautiously. "We shouldn't mess with it without knowing where it leads."

"It's probably a natural one generated in the dungeon. It's fine." Dungeons often formed natural transfer circles that invited people to delve farther in. Though, this was the first time I'd seen one.

It feels like a proper expedition now! This is great!

"Can we go through?" I asked excitedly.

Momo and Abel exchanged a look.

"Well, I'll follow your lead," Abel said.

"Sir Makoto's words are absolute!"

They were both willing. Although, they *could* have disagreed. *Welp, I'll get my way this time.* Still holding their hands, I stood in the circle.

An instant later, we were teleported away.

We were no longer in the water.

The cave around us seemed more open, and there were periodic pinpoints of dim light glowing in the darkness. I looked more closely. *That's...pure magicite. Where are we...?*



The deepest layer of Labyrinthos is near the leylines. Mana therefore leaks from those leylines, creating huge natural magicite deposits.

Even a small piece of magicite could make someone a fortune. But is it worth the risk?

The deepest layer of Labyrinthos is home to dragons, and even ancient dragons reside in its depths. There is no guarantee anyone might live to sell their treasure.

—*World of Adventure, Western Chapter*



We'd arrived. Fortunately, there were no monsters in sight. However, Scout told me that there were ferocious foes deeper in the cave.

"Abel, Momo, let's take a break here for now."

"R-Right... Where are we, exactly?"

"The deepest layer of Labyrinthos. The monsters are going to be stronger from here on out."

"Are you not going to rest?" Momo asked.

"We'll take turns. You rest first."

"Got it," she answered with a serious nod. I used my magic to dry the two of them off.

We had a simple meal of bread and ham from the provisions I'd brought along. I'd also packed some furs—Abel and Momo wrapped themselves up and lay down. Before long, I could hear their breathing even out. While they were sleeping, I kept watch.

The dungeon was quiet; the glowing magicite dimly lit the cave.

"Lucy, Sasa, I made it all the way here," I murmured.

It felt like years and years since the time we'd all fought together and escaped Labyrinthos's middle layer. I could see their faces in my mind and

was getting kind of sentimental. To shake away those thoughts, I started training my *Sun* and *Fate Magic*.

What should our next move be?

We'd gotten here more easily than expected. I'd anticipated us needing to scout it out a few more times, so I hadn't even packed much food. *Maybe we can go a little farther after our break and then head back.*

Suddenly, the air shimmered like a heat haze.

××××, ××××××××××? (*You seem bored, my liege. Would you like to chat?*)

"Undyne..."

A blue-skinned woman was now sitting next to me. I hadn't called her—she'd just decided to appear. It *was* well-timed, though. I was starting to get kind of bored. There was also something I wanted to ask her.

"Hey, Undyne, why do you call me 'my liege'?"

She smiled at the question. "Because one day, you will become our lord. I can tell..." She looked at me with adoration.

"One day," huh? Was she talking about when I would fight Alexander in the future? Noah had explained it—when I'd unleashed the power in my arm, I'd become an elemental lord. However, Noah had bound me after that, restricting me from ever becoming one again.

After arriving in the past, I'd attempted to transform, but it still hadn't worked. It was possible to turn just my arm into an elemental, but I'd fainted when trying to go all the way. Even though I wasn't part of Noah's faith anymore, it looked like the contract hadn't released me.

I watched Undyne as she smiled wider.

She wanted me to become an elemental lord, but I couldn't anymore. It felt like I was stringing her along somehow, but I couldn't really say anything.

"Incidentally... I have a request, my liege."

Hesitantly, she wrapped an arm around mine. She was made of water, of course, but since she possessed an infinite amount of mana, her touch felt like skin.

"Wh-What is it?" I asked. *Undyne? What could you possibly want me to do?*

"Can you call me by name?"

"By your name?"

“Yes, that’s right.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Uh, sure. What is your name?”

“I don’t have one...”

I paused for a moment, then flatly asked, “What?” I had no idea what she meant.

She quickly clarified. “my liege...please, give me a name.”

“You want me to name you?”

“Yes, please do.”

Huh. So “call me by name” meant “give me a name and then use it.” I could understand that at least. I wasn’t able to become an elemental lord anymore, but I *could* do that. Undyne had helped me over and over, so there was no reason for me to turn her down.

Her request was a bit sudden though, so I couldn’t think of anything at first.

“A name... Hmmm, a name... This is hard.”

“If it is from you, I will be happy with any name.”

“Still...”

She was gazing at me excitedly.

Hmmm. Oh, I know.

“Right, so we can take the ‘D’ from ‘Undyne,’ and since we believe in Noah of the Titanea...we can borrow the ‘A’ from ‘Noah.’”

Is that a bit much? I wasn’t sure, but I had a feeling Noah would just laugh it off and say she didn’t mind. Our goddess was a generous one.

“I’ve got it.”

“Yay!” Undyne was brimming with excitement.

“How about...Dia?” I asked.

She looked blankly back at me. *Does she not like it?*

“Dia... Diiiiia... Diaaah,” she said, sounding it out. “What a wonderful name!”

Phew, guess she does.

But then, she started to glow.

“Huh?”

Undyne—no, Dia—was surrounded by a veritable maelstrom of mana. Labyrinthos seemed to shudder in response. Mana was overflowing from her. The ground, walls, and even the air started to freeze. *Ack, this is bad!*

“S-Stop! Dia, stop!”

“R-Right. Apologies, my liege... I was just too happy to contain it.”

I stared at her silently and she bowed. Then I peered around at our frozen surroundings. All of that had happened because of Dia’s overwhelming joy.

I...might have miscalculated slightly.

The chill woke Momo and Abel.

“M-Makoto! What’s all this ice? Did someone attack?!” Abel was shivering somewhat. Momo seemed fine with the cold, though. Probably because she was a vampire.

Still, they looked confused.

“Sir Makoto?” Momo said eventually. “Who’s that woman?”

She was pointing at Dia, who was hanging off me.

Wait, what?

“You can see her?” I asked.

“When did you sneak a woman along? Ahh, she’s so pretty.”

Momo was kind of scaring me.

“Wait, wait. Dia, what’s going on?”

“Now that you have named me, my liege, I can materialize myself. I will be at your side until you die.”

“Huh?”

M-Materialize? Uh, so anyone could see her without needing to train their magic? Just naming her had done that?

“Who is she, Makoto?” Abel asked, glaring at Dia. “She has a horrifying amount of mana.”

“You didn’t say anything about this,” I said to her sharply.

“Tee hee.”

So she *knew* what would happen. She was even imitating Noah now.

“Sir Makotoooo.”

“Makoto?”

“Um, you see...” Frantically, I began explaining.

When I was done, Abel spoke first. “Let me get this straight—she’s Undyne, an arch elemental?”

“And when you named her, it allowed her to manifest herself so that we could see her?” Momo asked.

“Yes. My liege...is wonderful...” Dia said dreamily.

While the other two were looking at Dia suspiciously, the arch elemental

herself seemed unbothered.

Well, maybe she was holding on to me a bit *too* tightly...

“Don’t drape yourself all over him!” Momo protested. “You’re new here!”

“Oh? I’ve been by his side this whole time,” Dia retorted. “*You’ve* only just become his apprentice.”

“Sir Makoto, she’s too full of herself!”

“My liege, this kid’s the one who’s full of herself!”

The two of them were somehow already at odds, and they’d turned toward me in unison.

“No fighting in the party,” I told them.

“Hmm...”

“Hmph!”

The two pointedly turned their backs to one another. *I have a feeling I’m going to regret this.* But now, Dia could talk with people, which had to be a good thing. Still, something was bothering me.

“Are you going to stay visible the whole time?” I asked her.

“No, I will normally hide away in the elemental realm. I don’t want the damned gods in heaven to discover me.”

“The gods in heaven?” Momo asked.

“Discover you?” Abel added.

Ack, this topic is a problem.

I quickly covered her mouth and spoke in Elemanti.

“xxxxxxxx. xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx! (Don’t mention anything about me following Noah. Abel is one of the Sacred Deities’ heroes!)”

“xxxxxxxx! (A-Apologies, my liege!)”

That’d been close... I had no idea what Abel would say if he found out I was a “former” believer of a wicked deity. After all, Cain had earned his enmity.

“Suppose I’ll be off, then,” Dia said suddenly. An instant later, she vanished.

She was way too carefree. *And now I’m exhausted.*

“I’m going to take a rest, and then we can start exploring again,” I told the others.

Momo paused for a moment. “Okay... I’ll keep watch.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re so easygoing...” I heard Abel mutter in exasperation.

I ignored him. My body felt heavy, and as soon as I lay down, I felt myself drifting off to sleep.

I had no dreams.

When the three of us woke from our rest, we proceeded deeper into Labyrinthos. Colorful magicite was embedded in the walls and floor of the massive space. It was a gorgeous sight. At first glance, the cave itself appeared completely barren, but when I looked closer, I could see that odd, oasis-like pools of water had formed here and there, with plants growing around them. Birds and animals congregated in those areas as well.

But...

“It’s quiet, Sir Makoto,” Momo whispered.

“It is,” Abel agreed. “Is this really the deepest layer?”

Both of them looked somewhat confused. We hadn’t encountered a single monster for quite a while. If this *was* the right place, then surely it should be crawling with calamity-level foes. This whole area was known as “the Dragon Nest,” and by all accounts, dragons should be all around us, ready to attack at any moment. And yet...

“Tee hee hee! Looks like they’re scared of my manaaa.” Dia danced through the air, her voice singsongy and melodic. Her body was indeed radiating huge amounts of mana, almost like a bomb on the verge of detonation. She stuck out like a sore thumb.

“Dia, can you weaken it a bit more?”

“Unfortunately, My Liege, this is the minimum I can output.”

“I-I see...”

The mana felt like the amount you’d sense just before someone cast a king rank spell, but apparently, that was essentially *idling* for her.

Momo and Abel had initially felt on edge about being in the bottom layer, but now they looked somewhat lost. Dia was probably right—even the dragons were wary of her mana. *The situation’s far different than I expected...* That wasn’t a bad thing, though. Peace was ideal. Also, it helped me understand how powerful Dia actually was.

“Say, Dia. If this is the minimum amount of mana you can use, then how about your maximum? I’d wager you could do saint rank spells no problem...but what about divine rank?”

“I apologize, my liege, but I do not know exactly what those terms

mean. I assume that mortals use them to quantify spells in some way...”

“I see...” Well, it made sense that mortal magic classifications wouldn’t mean much to the elementals.

“However, I can answer your question of how much mana I can gather. I would *like* to say that I can pull all the water-aligned mana in the world. However, you would not be able to handle that. As you are currently... I could call the other Undyne—my sisters—from around the world, and they would listen to you.”

“Your sisters? There’s more than one Undyne?”

“There are others. Once, we were one, but in that damned Titano—Ahem. In the war, we were split...”

A damned war, huh? She probably means Titanomachia. Guess that’s a legend in this era too. Still, I didn’t realize there was more than one water arch elemental.

“Got it. So your sisters’ll help me if I need it?”

“Precisely, my liege.”

Several Undyne lending me a hand... Definitely reassuring.

Dia offered a proud hum as she puffed out her chest. *That’s just like Noah too. I wonder how my goddess is doing...*

As that thought crossed my mind, Momo tugged on my sleeve.

“Sir Makoto! We’re being watched.”

“Where?” I asked, quickly peering around. *There—I think Clairvoyance picked something up.*

“Oh, they hid when I spotted them,” said Momo. “I think they’re dragons.”

“I didn’t notice anything at all...” Abel murmured.

“Nor did I,” I assured him.

Momo’s vampirification had made her abilities, quite frankly, *terrifying*. Once we increased her magic skills, she’d leave me in the dust in terms of combat.

“Thanks, Momo,” I said, stroking her hair.

She giggled in response. *Such a cutie...* She seemed completely different from the future Grandsage. They looked identical though, so they were definitely the same person.

“You need not worry, my liege,” Dia interjected. “As long as I am here, you have nothing to fear from any monster.”

“But letting your guard down is deadly. Right, Sir Makoto?!” Momo insisted, squeezing my hand.

“Carelessness is out of the question, my liege,” Dia said, grabbing my other hand. “Let us *Synchro*.”

Uh, having both hands full is kinda...

“Okay, you two keep watch on our surroundings,” I told them, slipping my hands free. As I did, I activated *Scout*. Of course, there were no monsters nearby, but we stayed fairly alert as we went farther in.

In the end, no monsters ended up appearing.

Half a day of exploration later, we were as far into the layer as you could get.

“This...”

“Is the way down...”

We stood in front of a huge threshold, like a gate. It yawned half open in the darkness, and the path beyond it went even deeper. I’d expected some signs of a barrier, but there were none. *I guess an open gate is like a challenge...*

The legendary holy dragon lived just down that path.

I took the bait and slowly stepped through. The path was like a long, winding slope downward, and gradually, the ground evened out. Additionally, plants started to sprout from the plain stone floor, though none of the vegetation was like anything that I’d seen aboveground. Despite us still being in the dungeon, this area was brightly lit. I could tell that it wasn’t sunlight, though—it was magic.

This layer was a massive dome.

The odd, shadowy figures I spotted were all dragons—probably ancient dragons. They didn’t approach, but they were watching... I could *feel* it. It was kinda frightening. They didn’t seem on the verge of attacking, but the atmosphere was far from friendly.

We slowly carried on. Right in the center of the space was a spring. *It must run through a leyline, since it’s sparkling with a massive amount of mana.* Pure white flowers bloomed around the water’s edge. The area around the spring was brighter than the rest of the dome, and I quickly realized that this was the center of the whole layer.

There was something besides flowers next to the spring—something

massive that was lounging in the open space.

A single white dragon.

Abel the Savior and the Holy Dragon Helemmelk. Depictions of the two were everywhere: from statues in towns to picture books to murals in churches. This duo had made the most impact in the battle that'd sealed Iblis's defeat, and therefore, future generations had immortalized them everywhere.

But in the present, a huge dragon with white scales was right in front of me. *So this is the holy dragon...* I forgot *Calm Mind* for a while and just let myself marvel at the sight.

"Sir Makoto..." Momo murmured, gripping my sleeve tightly.

"What's up, Momo?"

"*That*. That *dragon* is 'what's up.'" She was shaking.

Abel turned to me. "Makoto, that is the boss of Labyrinthos."

"It is?"

"An ancient dragon said to be over ten thousand years old that resides in the deepest reaches of Labyrinthos," he recited. "To think it really exists..."

Abel's voice was shaking as well. Well, ten thousand years was damn impressive! Just what you'd expect from the savior's mount!

"Let's go say hi," I declared.

The other two stared at me like I'd just gone mad. Had I really said something that weird?

I glanced at Dia.

"What is it, my liege?" she asked, casually stretching her limbs.

Well, she's acting normal at least.

I strode briskly over to the white dragon, with Momo and Abel trailing behind.

The dragon kept its eyes closed as it slept. I realized this only when I got within ten meters of it—those eyes opened partway and fixed on me. Seeing them from such a close distance was really overwhelming.

"It's nice to meet you," I called up to the dragon. "My name's Makoto."

No response. Maybe it couldn't hear me?

"Um, hellooo? Holy dragon?"

Still no response. Uh? Could the dragon not understand our language?

This might be a problem...

"Can you under—"

A voice resounded in my head.

“What do you want, human?”

O-Oh... Was it speaking straight into my mind?!

“Um, well, a group of us are traveling to defeat Iblis. Would you be willing to help us?” I only realized after I spoke...but maybe I should’ve had Abel say that.

“And why would I help humans?”

Well, that wasn’t a friendly answer. Quite the opposite, actually.

“M-Makoto...”

“Sir Makoto...”

Momo and Abel yanked me back.

“What’s up?” I asked, looking at them. Their expressions were tight.

“L-Let’s go...”

“Th-That dragon seems angry...”

Does it? It’s a legendary dragon, so I doubt it’s short-tempered.

I looked back, but the white dragon seemed completely uninterested in us now—its eyes were closed again. It also wasn’t reacting to Abel at all. Uhh? Wasn’t it going to help? Maybe we’d come too early?

According to the picture book, the holy dragon had joined Abel after he’d defeated Bifrons. Maybe that victory was what made the dragon recognize him.

Right now, at least, Holy Dragon Helemmelk definitely didn’t seem willing to help.

Oh well. Guess it’s time to head back.

I’d just decided to call the visit a partial triumph when there was a blast of air. The ground shook, and a massive red dragon appeared in front of us—it was ancient, and its crimson scales almost seemed to burn.

It spoke, licking its lips. “Hey, mother, can we eat them?”

C-Come on! This monster was over a thousand years old... Hadn’t it grown up by now? There were dragons that acted like bad-boy teens?!

“Makoto, this is the legendary village eater!” Abel exclaimed. “It loves attacking humans, and no one knows how many of us it’s eaten!”

Momo yelped in fear.

Hmm...an ancient dragon that likes eating humans... Getting spotted by that thing was definitely a stroke of bad luck.

“Holy dragon.” I spoke over the red dragon in front of us, addressing the

white one that lounged by the spring. She seemed to be the one in charge. “We didn’t come here to fight. Would you let us leave in peace?”

“Do as you wish,” she said.

Unfortunately, that reply had been to the red dragon’s question—not mine. Instantly, the fiery dragon grinned and moved to attack.

This was...not good. I grabbed Dia’s hand.

Time Magic: Mind Accel.

This was one of the low rank *Fate Magic* spells I’d learned recently. The spell made a single second mentally feel like several dozen times that.

Those effects were also shared with Dia through the contact with my hand.

I used *Synchro* and spoke mentally to her.

“Dia, can you hear me?” I asked.

“I can, my liege. What is your plan?”

“Well, I don’t want to fight the holy dragon’s comrades...”

“Even though that red lizard had the gall to suggest eating you?”

I glanced at her. She was gazing coolly at the dragon, but I thought I saw a fleck of irritation in her eyes.

“Dia, disable him without killing him.”

“Yes, my liege.”

The *Mind Accel* stopped. Dia’s voice sounded in my head once more.

Freezing Breath.

She exhaled a puff of air. Instantly, the red dragon transformed into a statue of ice. He...wasn’t dead?

“Dia?” I asked.

“It’s fiine,” she replied with a snicker. “I held back.”

Well, she seems to be in a better mood now...

“Uh?”

“H-Huh?”

Abel and Momo, along with all of the other dragons in the area, were agape. But, a moment later, all of those dragons stood and advanced on us menacingly.

Yeah...that figures.

“Holy dragon, we don’t wish to fight you. Please, let us—”

I was cut off by roars.

“You lowly human!”

“Don’t think you’ll escape alive!”

Yeah, this wasn't good. Ancient dragons were more short-tempered than expected.

"Makoto! Let's get out of here!" Abel exclaimed, drawing his sword.

"T-Teacher!" Momo stammered. "The others are attacking!"

I'd come here to meet the holy dragon, not to fight. Plus, if we beat up all these dragons, would the holy dragon actually be willing to work with us? I glanced her way, but her eyes were closed. She wasn't going to stop them.

"Escaping will be difficult, my liege," Dia whispered cheerily.

She was right. They had surrounded us, so we couldn't run away. It seemed like we weren't going to avoid a fight. One of the dragons opened their maw, ready to unleash their breath upon us.

I sighed, casting fate magic once more.

Time Magic: Mind Accel.

I turned to Dia. "*Can you disable all of the ancient dragons here?*"

"Sure! Though it might be hard to do on my own."

"How many Undyne do you need?" I asked.

I think another four or five should be fine. Shall I call them?

Well, it's not like we've got another choice. Go for it.

I will need a small amount of your mana to summon them. Is that acceptable?

My mana? Well...I don't mind.

I was a mage apprentice, so I had essentially no mana to begin with. Why would she need it?

Tee hee. Thank you. Well then... Come here, little sisters. Dia waved a hand, and blue light gathered in the air, immediately coalescing into people.

Five Undyne appeared. They looked just like Dia.

H-Huh...

I was feeling woozy. It was like I'd lost all of my strength and lead weights had been dumped on my shoulders. Was this...?

"Say, Dia. How much of my life span did you use to summon your sisters?"

"Huh?" She looked blankly back at me.

She'd definitely taken my lifespan, not my mana. Although, both mana and lifespan were infinite for elementals, so I suppose an Undyne didn't see any real difference between them.

“Um... Oh. Roughly ten years of mana, I think.”

“Right.”

Ten years of my life span... Ten years for five Undyne. That wasn't sustainable. Actually, using the arch elementals at all was oddly tiring...so maybe working with them used up my lifespan? I'd need to top up somewhere.

“U-Um...did I mess up?” she asked nervously, eyes watering.

“No, you're fine.”

This was an extenuating circumstance—we were in real trouble. If I died now, that was it.

“Dia, make sure you put that life span to good use.”

Her face broke out into a wide smile. “Of course, my liege. Order us as you wish. Let us educate these young lizards. Altogether, they've only got a few millennia between them.”

Her smile took on a cruel edge. Well, I suppose the Undyne were an emotional bunch.

I sighed slightly before issuing my orders.

◇ White Dragon Helemmelk's Perspective ◇

For millennia, I have existed in this world. My family spread my reputation as an ancient dragon who had been alive for over ten thousand years. I have not yet lived that long...but no matter.

Over the span of my life, I'd grown to rather dislike conflict, so I spent my time in peace in the depths of Labyrinthos. The lack of sunlight irked me, but the surface was blanketed by those damned *Clouds of Darkness* anyway. Therefore, even if I climbed aboveground, not a sunbeam could be found. It was completely demoralizing.

My life was static. My boredom grew as time passed with nothing happening. I did not *hate* my lot, but I was losing interest. Then, one day, strange invaders appeared.

One of them was half vampire.

Another was a hero of the goddesses.

Another was a mage woman with vast amounts of mana.

And the last... *What in the world?* He seemed to have no strength at all. Perhaps he was the hero's attendant.

They were a strange group, likely what the surface dwellers called adventurers. I had not intended to interact with them...but then the *weakest* of the bunch asked for my strength. *Foolishness. Why should I aid humans?*

I ignored the human's words. He would understand that it was pointless to inquire and then leave. That was fine. The lowest depths of Labyrinthos were not hospitable to humans.

But then, the situation churned into motion.

The youngest of the ancient dragons made a move on the humans. I barely had the chance to feel exasperated before that dragon was frozen solid. It happened in an instant.

The female mage had done it.

What?!

That was when I realized...she was not a human. She was an Undyne.

But...manifested in physical form? Impossible. That technique had been lost to the sands of time. Even *I* had never seen it. That old magic was the domain of the wicked deities' believers—but those zealots were gone now, relics of the past. There should have been no current users of such a technique.

Yet the Undyne called the male “my liege.”

There were traces...traces left behind from the distant war between the gods. Traces of those who bent the elementals to their will.

She served him? He was one of the wicked deities' believers?

No, there was another—Black Knight Cain, who had been rampaging across the surface. He had called himself the Wicked Deity Noah's disciple. I had seen him once. He was a broken man, unable to withstand the goddess's love. The affection of a wicked deity would either complete a person...or break them.

But what of the man in front of me? As far as I could tell, he was a normal person. However, the arch elemental at his side was serving him. In that case, how could he possibly be *normal*? Was he one of their disciples?

No, that was not the concern. The problem here was whether we dragons could stand against him.

That doubt swirled through my mind for a moment. But then, in the next instant, all thoughts were blown away.

Five Undyne appeared.

I-Impossible. The arch elementals were embodiments of raging nature.

They were calamity by another name. And now, five of them, standing in front of me. In other words, *five calamities* were taking place at once.

The whole of Labyrinthos will drown! H-How can we face someone like this?

“Everyone, stop,” I commanded.

But I was too late.

“Ah ha ha ha ha!”

“Tee hee hee...”

“Ga ha ha ha...”

“Heh...heh...”

The elementals' laughter echoed through the cave. As the noise reverberated, enough mana to swallow the entire bottom level tore through the air in a vicious torrent. *Horrifying*. It was barely even mana at this point, but more like an ominous power similar to the anima the gods wielded.

Suddenly, an absurd spell—*miracle?*—occurred.

xxxxxxxxxxxxx (*Quiescent World*)

Those ancient words were spoken in the elemental language. I had lived for millennia and this was still the first time I had heard this spell.

The entire layer was enveloped in white. Floors, walls, even the air itself had frozen. I couldn't hear my brethren breathing; I couldn't even hear their heartbeats. The world was silent... Dead.

Th-That was close...

I had cast a barrier just before the spell hit. Thanks to that, I had managed to avoid the magic. However, my family...

E-Everyone...they're all...

I looked around—literally everyone but me had been frozen solid. I stared at the one who had caused this. The wicked deity's follower was standing in the middle of six Undyne.

I could feel essentially no mana coming from him...but he had definitely led the elementals. His frozen eyes pierced me.

Y-You...

However, as I tried to speak to him, my voice shaking, there was a roar.

“Youuuuu!” The young red dragon who had first attacked was free once again.

A spell like this wasn't enough to kill us, but...

“Oh, little lizard. I’m glad you’re well. However, don’t you think you

are being rude to my liege?”

The Undyne stole his freedom once more.

“Guh...I cannot move...”

This young dragon was no match for the arch elementals.

“My liege, what shall we do with this impudent lizard?”

Throughout the elemental assault, the manaless man had remained quiet, but he spoke now. “Well...I *do* need to fill up on my lifespan.” He drew the dagger from his waist. The moment I saw the blade, I felt like it had been driven through my heart.

What is that dagger?! It was tiny, but the mana surrounding it felt all-consuming, like it was breathing everything in. It wasn’t like the holy swords the heroes wielded. This was not a weapon that creatures living in this world should possess. Rather, it was like one of the gods’ weapons I had once seen.

The man slowly approached the red dragon, dagger in hand.

“Eep! S-Stay away!” Even the young one seemed to understand what was happening. He tried to escape, but the arch elementals’ magic wouldn’t allow it.

What was going on...? At once, time itself unfolded in front of my eyes. This ability was a blessing given to me by a goddess. I activated my vision and gazed into the near future.

For some reason, I could not see the man’s future. I could see ours, though.

Today, we would be destroyed by ×××××××.

The moment I saw that, I threw myself to the ground.

“Please, wait! Don’t kill my family!!!”

I abandoned my shame, lowering my head to the human man.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

“Please, wait! Don’t kill my family!!!”

The white dragon’s thoughts echoed loudly in my head. The voice wasn’t the dignified speech I’d heard earlier, but a panicked gabble. I exchanged glances with Dia.

“What shall we do, my liege?”

“We’ll leave it there.” We weren’t going to keep fighting if the dragons

ceased their attack. “Dia, unfreeze them.”

“Of course, my liege.”

Dia and the others got to work, and before long, the ancient dragons were breathing once more. I could see them cringing away from the Undyne in fear.

That should be fine, right?

I glanced toward the white dragon—she had lowered her head in relief.

“My thanks. You may do as you wish with my strength. I shall aid you.”

Whoo! She’d agreed! Things hadn’t gone according to plan...but we had her help now.

“I look forward to working with you, holy dragon.”

“I-Indeed...”

I had done my best to be friendly, but her voice in my head sounded confused. Things *had* been a bit touch and go...but oh well. *We’ll just have to proceed slowly.*

“So, our plans are—”

“S-Sir Makoto! It’s awful!” Momo interrupted, tugging at me.

I turned and saw where she was pointing. There, on the ground, was Abel—he was prone, the whites of his eyes showing.

What?!

“Abel? What’s wrong?!”

“He’s not breathing!”

“Wha?”

Wh-What happened? Did the ancient dragons attack him?!

I glared at the white dragon, but she was shaking her head swiftly.

“I-I believe it was due to your magic. The vampire girl has more resilience, but his body likely couldn’t stand the arch elementals’ magic up close.”

“Guh!”

So it was my fault. Or, well, the Undynes’ magic was to blame. *Are their spells like freaking indiscriminate bombs or something?!*

“Wh-What do we do, Momo?!”

“I don’t know!”

The two of us were panicking, when suddenly, the white dragon interrupted.

“Let me see. I will heal him.”

At once, Abel's body began to glow. His pale face began to redden, and I could hear him breathing quietly.

"Ph-Phew..."

If my spell had killed him...we'd be pretty boned. The world would just end. *And Althena'd kill me.*

"Thank you...holy dragon," I mumbled.

She looked quizzically back at me, and her voice in my mind was full of confusion. *"I have been wondering... What do you mean by 'holy dragon'?"*

Huh? Was she not the legendary Holy Dragon Helemmelk? Had I recruited the wrong dragon?

"Incidentally, could you tell me your name?" I asked.

"My name is White Dragon Helemmelk. I am the boss of Labyrinthos."

Helemmelk... That was the same name, so "holy dragon" must have been something they'd started calling her later.

"Lady Helemmelk, thank you for saving Abel." I bowed my head deeply, properly showing my appreciation.

"You spared our lives. You need not thank me. Additionally, you should allow him to rest. He has been pushing himself rather hard, and fatigue is building within him. I have created a place where a human may rest next to the Spring of Life. Place him there."

I glanced over and saw an out-of-place bed lying at the dragon's side, next to the glowing water.

Huh. That wasn't there before... So she'd made it in an instant. She'd used a healing spell on Abel as well, so she must use all sorts of magic.

Momo and I pulled Abel over to the bed. He was still sleeping. I glanced to my side and saw that Momo seemed tired as well.

"You can rest too, y'know," I told her.

"O-Okay... You look tired too."

"Yeah, I am."

Losing so much of my lifespan had really worn me out. Right now, I just wanted to lie down and sleep.

"I will keep watch," Dia offered. She was the only one of us still properly awake.

"Thanks, Dia. I'll count on you, then."

"Of course, my liege."

The white dragon made Momo and I beds as well. Momo collapsed into

hers and fell asleep immediately.

I lay down in mine as well and closed my eyes. In seconds, I was drifting off.

I woke up. I wondered how long I'd slept, but I had no watch, so I couldn't tell. Though I was still somewhat tired, the all-encompassing exhaustion had gone. I could hear cute little snores behind me, so I knew Momo was still asleep.

"Are you awake, human?" came a low voice in my head.

Whoa, that was a surprise! I jolted as I saw the white dragon's massive frame in front of me. *That's one way to shake off my grogginess...*

"I slept well, thank you," I told her.

She replied with a dignified nod.

Now for the elemental who'd been keeping watch...

"Huh. Dia?"

She was supposed to be standing guard...but she was nowhere to be found.

"The Undyne have returned to the elemental realm. Of course, this 'Dia' also said that she would be watching and would be at your side in an instant if we dragons tried anything."

I sighed. "Oh, right..."

Where was the elemental realm, exactly? *Eh, whatever.* Dia was a real help. *I'll thank her later.*

Now all we needed was for Abel to wake up.

I moved over to his bed to check on him. He still seemed to be sleeping, so I moved close enough to inspect him properly.

"Huh?"

I stopped in my tracks.

Abel should have been sleeping there, but in his place...was a familiar woman.

I blinked several times, thinking I was still asleep. However, the sight in front of me didn't change.

I peered closely at the woman in the bed. She had sparkling golden hair and skin that seemed as smooth as silk. Her face was almost angelic as she slept. Slowly, her eyes drifted open.

"Mmm, huh? What happened?" she asked tiredly, rubbing her sapphire

eyes. She sat up, and I saw that her hair was slightly mussed from sleeping.

I was lost for words. Then, she looked at me.

“Makoto? Ah! I fell asleep?! The ancient dragons are right there!”

Her clothes were...Abel's. Of course, he was fairly petite to begin with, but she was even smaller. The woman seemed flustered as she shifted back and forth on the bed. She looked just like...

P-Princess Noelle?

The person was the spitting image of the princess of Highland.

That was impossible, though... We were in the past, so this *couldn't* be her.

“*Are you awake, human hero?*” Holy Dragon Helemmelk's relieved question sounded in my mind.

And yet...I was far from relaxed.

“Um, Makoto? What's wrong?” The Princess Noelle look-alike cocked her head, confused.

She was in Abel's clothes... And on top of that, she was speaking the same way as he did. So the only question I could ask was...

“Are you really...Abel?”

She looked confused for a moment. Then, she seemed to realize something. She whipped her head this way and that before noticing the spring, then rushed over and peered at her reflection in the water. Her eyes widened as she caught a glimpse of her appearance.

She looked awkwardly back, her eyes drifting slightly to the side as she gazed up at me.

They were exactly the same as Abel's eyes.

“Yes...I'm Hero Abel...” she murmured, fidgeting and then linking her hands behind her back.

A-Abel turned into a girl?!



Chapter 5: Makoto Takatsuki Meets the Saint

The girl, who looked just like Princess Noelle, stared at me awkwardly, then finally spoke.

“Yes. I am...Abel.”

“You’re...a girl?” I asked in confusion.

“Well... I’m not quite—”

The dragon suddenly cut her off. “*You carry the blood of the avians, don’t you?*”

“Mel, when you say ‘avians,’ do you mean—”

“*Y-You...*” the dragon sputtered. “*Is ‘Mel’ supposed to mean me?! Well...call me as you will, I suppose. I did lose. And by ‘avians,’ I mean one of the races that serve the gods.*”

“A race that serves the gods...”

Oh, I remembered now—I’d met some avians when Rosalie had taken Lucy and me on that world tour. They were a race of women with wings. So...was Abel one of them? I hadn’t heard anything about that in the legends, and it wasn’t in the picture book.

I turned back to her—to Abel. Beautiful white wings unfurled from her back. She looked just like an angel.

“The white dragon is right. I am descended from the avians, and that is connected to my gender.”

Indeed, said Mel. The avians are a race consisting only of women. However, the hero was a human male until just now. I presume he is of mixed blood.

Abel nodded. “That’s right. When I am a man, I call myself Abel. My human father gave me that name. However, there are times when my avian heritage is stronger, and I turn into a woman. When that happens, I use the name my avian mother gave me: Anna.”

“Anna?!” I couldn’t help but shout.

I'd lost track of how many times I'd been shocked today. *Hero Abel...and Saint Anna...are the same person?!*

According to the legend, they'd been childhood friends and lovers. The writings, paintings, and teachings of the church all said as much. However, Abel was personally telling me otherwise. This seemed like more solid evidence than anything the church had proclaimed.

"I've never seen you so surprised..." Abel murmured. "I am terribly sorry for hiding it. Outside of my parents, only my mentor knew."

The avians, who serve as messengers for the gods, only reside on the floating continent, said Mel. The demons see them as enemies, so if they found an avian on the surface, they would do their utmost to kill them.

"Exactly. I had no choice but to hide my heritage...just like my mother." Abel looked away sadly, and I couldn't bear to interrupt the conversation between her and the dragon.

All of this was new to me. The avians, Abel's parents...and the truth behind Anna.

One thing is clear, though.

Abel, the Hero of Light.

Saint Anna.

The Grandsage.

Johnnie the Spellbow.

Helemmelk the Holy Dragon.

The legendary party was now assembled! *Whew... Noah, Althena...I did it!*

I'd fallen deep into my thoughts, and I was pulled back to reality when someone tapped my shoulder.

"Um...Makoto?"

Whoops, I was off in a world of my own. I turned to Abel. "Okay, I get what's going on." *It's finally time to say it.* "We can now...fight Iblis."

"Huh?"

What?!

Both Abel and the white dragon gawked at me.

"Where did *that* come from?!"

Are you sane?!

Aaah... They thought I was crazy. Guess I got carried away. Though the legendary party was finally all in one place, Iblis was an embodiment of

fear. He was treated as an absolute, unequivocal evil in this world.

“Well...” I scratched my cheek. “Maybe we should take on Bifrons first.”

“That’s not...” Abel shook her head. “Um, Makoto?”

You do realize that Bifrons stands above even the other nine demon lords, yes? asked Mel.

Neither seemed on board with that plan, even though I’d suggested taking out the lesser threat before going for the Great Demon Lord.

“Mmm... So noisy...”

It seemed that Abel and the white dragon’s voices had roused Momo. She crawled out of the bed.

“Teacher, is Sir Abel awake ye— Huh?! Who’s this woman?!”

“Hey, Momo,” said Abel. “I’m actually—”

““Hey”?! Don’t talk like you know me when we’ve only just met!”

“Ah, but we haven’t just met, I’m—”

Incidentally, Elementalist, I do not even know your name. Would you tell me?

Things had gotten way noisier all of a sudden. Though the dragon’s words made me realize that we actually *hadn’t* introduced ourselves.

I managed to calm Momo down—with Mel’s help, I explained Abel’s situation and identity. Then, we all gave our names.

Hmm... Mel gazed down at us. Although realistically, she was so big that she couldn’t not look down at us. Makoto the Elementalist, Abel the Hero, and Momo the Half Vampire. I look forward to working with you.

Momo and Abel still seemed a bit unnerved by her and weren’t quite ready to drop formalities.

“Likewise, Lady Dragon...”

“L-Likewise, Lady Helemmelk.”

Oh, speaking of introductions and the group... There was one more important person with us.

“Dia,” I called out.

Instantly, Dia popped into existence by my side. “Yes, my liege?”

“Thanks for keeping watch. We got some decent rest.”

“It is an honor to be of service.”

“The white dragon is on our side now, so go ahead and introduce yourself.”

“Haah...” Dia peered at Mel, who fidgeted warily—the Undyne’s demeanor shifted from all smiles to a look of utter boredom. “You should be honored to serve my liege, liz—”

“Oy,” I cut Dia off, grabbing her shoulder and yanking her toward me.

“M-My liege?”

“Dia, Mel here was kind enough to help us. Show her proper respect.”

“O-Of course! My apologies!”

I turned back to the dragon. “Sorry she was so rude to you, Mel.”

I-Indeed. It is no concern. Also, my “kind” behavior was in direct response to your threat...

Great, the legendary holy dragon was just as open-minded as I’d hoped!

“Boss of Labyrinthos,” Dia said. “I am the Undyne given the name Dia by my liege. A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

At least she had better manners this time...

I am the ancient dragon Helemmelk. Incidentally, is the naming of an Undyne not one of the Titanea’s—

“Dia!” I ordered as I realized what the dragon was about to reveal.

Instantly, the area was covered in a thick mist. It wasn’t a normal mist either—it had elemental mana running through it. I heard one of the ancient dragons yelp. Was it that red one from earlier?

Wh-What in the world is wrong? Mel asked in confusion.

“××××, ××××××××××××××××××××? (Mel, can you understand Elemanti?)” I asked.

××××××××. *(To a degree.)*

Thank goodness. Well, she *had* lived for like ten millennia, so she probably knew almost everything.

“××××××××××××××××××××××××. ×××××? (The others don’t know that I follow a Titanea. Can you play along?)”

×-××××××××××××××××××. *(V-Very well.)*

Whew, that was close! I used water magic to clear the air.

“Makoto?” Abel asked.

Momo tilted her head. “What’s wrong?”

Both of them looked confused.

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it, you two.”

I used *Calm Mind* to relax my nerves. Abel then took a step forward and grasped my hand.

“Um...Makoto?”

“Y-Yes?”

Had I seemed too sketchy? Had Abel realized that I worshiped the same goddess as Cain? *No, I should be fine.* There was no proof of my allegiance to Noah. It wasn't even written in my Soul Book.

“Um... Could you call me Anna when I'm like this?” she asked, fidgeting.

Oh... That's all? Great! She didn't suspect a thing.

“Okay then, Anna. I...still look forward to working with you.”

“R-Right.”

We shook hands. She was smiling, but for some reason, her cheeks looked kind of red. Maybe she still hadn't fully recovered?

“Sir Makotooooo,” Momo trilled.

“What's up?” I asked.

She huffed, pouting. “Nothing.”

Maybe she was hungry? I'd have to give her some blood later.

“Let's head back to the surface,” I suggested. “Mel, can we return here when we need your help?”

The dragon cocked her head curiously at my question. *I shall come with you. It will be more convenient.*

“Huh? You don't mind?” That'd be great...but wouldn't it cause problems? She led these ancient dragons, after all.

“Mother! You cannot seriously consider going with this *human!*”

“Then I shall come too!”

“What should we do?!”

Just as I'd expected, a clamor arose among the other dragons.

I simply want to visit the surface. It's been so long. You should all stay here—this area is safe. If you wish to accompany us, speak to the elementalists. But if, like earlier, you cannot defend against the Undyne's magic...you will likely be a hindrance.

Silence stretched out in the wake of her words. Anna also looked awkward. Well, all the dragons except Mel *had* been frozen...

Mel looked at me seriously. *Elementalist, there is something I wish to ask. What is your goal?*

“To defeat the demon lords and Iblis. To bring peace to the world.”

Mel and the other ancient dragons looked at me with wide eyes.

“*Peace?* I’m surprised he even knows that word,” muttered an ancient dragon.

I glanced sideways and saw that Anna and Momo were taken aback as well. *Man, everyone native to this time period is really terrified of Iblis, huh?* But that didn’t change anything. I would work with the Hero of Light and defeat the Great Demon Lord.

Mel shook her large head. *So you are targeting not just the demon lords, but an even higher existence. Ordinarily, I would discount that as the ramblings of a fool, but—*

“Impossible! Even Lord Astaroth was no match!”

“A man cannot kill the demons’ god!”

“Foolish human! You know not of the terror he commands...”

The ancient dragons couldn’t believe that I was even suggesting the possibility of defeating Iblis.

“No, it’s possible.” I looked them dead in the eyes. “I know it.”

I mean, it made sense that defeating Iblis would be unthinkable to those of this era. I was from the future though, so Iblis’s defeat was a matter of fact. We didn’t need to worry. After all, everyone in the Savior’s party was safe and well. We just had to follow history and take things as they came.

“Lizards...you do not know my liege’s strength,” Dia proclaimed, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and manipulating her mana. An ominous feeling filled the air. *Come on, Dia, stop abusing your strength.*

Mel seemed to cringe back. “*Please, Undyne, do not treat my family too harshly.*”

I sighed. “Knock it off, Dia.”

She allowed one more beat of tense silence, then said, “Fine,” and stopped the mana manipulation.

“All right. Mel, you’re the only one coming with us. It’s kinda far to the middle layer, though...” I thought back on that long path into the depths of the dungeon. “Do you know any shortcuts?”

You need not worry. I can teleport us to wherever you would like to go.

Oh! She could do that? Whoo!

I turned to Anna and Momo, ready to leave...and then realized something.

“Anna...is it okay for you to go back to the others looking like that?” I asked.

“I’d prefer to be in human form,” she murmured, her face conflicted, “but I’m not fully recovered.”

Mel quickly offered a solution. *You may drink from the Spring of Life.*

“Huh...”

Well, there *was* an enormous amount of mana coming from the spring. Anna approached and took a sip. As the water touched her lips, she was enveloped in light.

“Wow! I feel so much better.” The exhaustion that had clung to her features was nowhere to be seen. The spring seemed to act like a recovery item. Also, *she* had turned back into a *he*.

I stepped closer and scooped up some of the water for myself. The second I drank it, I felt my body heating up from the inside.

I was...being filled with mana. *W-Wow... This is just as good as an elixir?!*

“Whoa! I want to try too!” Momo rushed over toward the spring.

Hm? I felt a strange sense of unease. Suddenly, a screen with words floated up in front of me.

Will you stop Momo before she drinks from the Spring of Life?

Yes

No

Wh-What the—?!

“Momo! Stop!” I yelled.

At the same time, Mel shouted, *Wait, little vampire!*

“Huh?” Momo instantly froze.

“You can’t drink that!”

Water from the Spring of Life is anathema to the undead.

“E-Eep!” She leaped back and clung to me.

Th-That was close. I’d almost forgotten—the undead couldn’t use recovery substances.

“Here, Momo, take my blood.”

“O-Okay...”

I held out my arm and let her drink a little. When she’d finished, I let out

a deep sigh. Today had been utterly exhausting, in more ways than one. I just wanted to curl up and sleep...and eat some meat to make up for the blood loss.

“Let’s head back.”

“Ah, Makoto—”

“If you would, Mel.”

Of course.

At Mel’s gesture, a magic circle appeared on the ground beneath all of our feet. Well, not “all.” The other dragons...

“Mother!”

“Be well!”

Around us, the ancient dragons were all waving tearily. The sight was surreal and a half.

You all need to behave, she ordered.

We were quickly engulfed in light. A second later, the scenery had changed. The first thing I noticed was the roar of cascading water.

“Wah!”

“Ahh!”

“Whoops!”

Abel and Momo couldn’t stand on the water, so I grabbed their hands and cast *Walk on Water*. I peered around. We were definitely back on the lake.

Man! Teleportation is so convenient. Now we just need to find Volf and Julietta and let them know we’re back—

My thoughts were interrupted by a scream. “An ancient dragon!”

“Th-That’s the boss of Labyrinthos! What is that doing here?!”

“R-Ruuuuun!”

“Help us!”

The watchmen all scattered.

Say...Elementalist, is this not an issue? Mel asked, looking at me in concern.

Crap...

After I managed to calm everyone down, I explained the situation.

“Let me get this straight. You...went down to the lowest reaches of the dungeon?” Johnnie asked. He was holding his head in his hand as if he had

a migraine.

We were in front of the lake, and the dungeon town's residents had all gathered around. This was a wide-open area, and normally, monsters would be a concern. Right now though, there was not a single one to be seen. The reason for that was...

"Um... That woman...is the boss of Labyrinthos?" Julietta asked haltingly, staring at Mel.

The dungeon's boss had appeared on the middle level, causing the monsters to flee in terror. Now, the whole layer was peaceful. The monsters must've been having heart attacks.

One more thing—Mel had used *Transform* to change herself into a human woman. Of course, she was still around two meters tall and built like a model, so she definitely stood out.

"Precisely, elf," said Mel. "I am Helemmelk, the leader of the ancient dragons on the deepest level. It has been centuries since I have stepped aboveground, but I assume my name is known." She puffed out her chest.



“Well, yeah... We do know of you...”

“The legendary ancient dragon...”

“No way...why is she here?”

Mel was like a celebrity.

Johnnie shook his head in disbelief. “Sir Makoto, you said you would just be briefly scouting the lower layer...”

“Yup, that’s right. We only spent a night away.”

Silent and incredulous looks pinned me.

Why all the fuss? We came back when I said we would.

“S-Sir Makoto, perhaps you would like to rest? The journey must have been exhausting.” This offer came from the elf who looked like Lucy. The slight quaver in her voice was probably caused by her fear of Mel.

“Yeah, I could do with a nap.” I glanced at Johnnie. “I want to fight Bifrons soon. Would you come with us?” The legendary party was all together now, so I figured Bifrons shouldn’t be too much of a concern. At least, that was my thinking.

“What?!” Everyone’s shocked exclamations rang out at once, and the faces around me were bewildered.

“S-Sir Makoto?! What in the world?!” exclaimed the Lucy look-alike.

“Sir Makoto!” shouted the Hero of Iron. “Don’t be absurd!”

Beastmen around us called out in aghast protest. The noise in the cavern increased to a deafening roar.

“Calm yourselves! Quiet!” yelled Johnnie.

Mel, Abel, and Momo barely reacted. They just looked resigned.

All I’d said was that we should get ready to fight the demon lord...

History said that Bifrons had been defeated first, so surely it wasn’t *that* weird to target him now. Johnnie looked conflicted, though.

Mel then spoke. “Incidentally, Makoto, if you are fighting a demon lord...does that mean you have a holy sword?”

“A holy sword?” I repeated.

“The demon lords are blessed by their Daemon. Without a holy sword to strengthen blessings from the Sacred Deities, defeating them will be impossible.”

“Hmmm, you *really* need one?” I asked.

“How did you not know that?!”

Well, I’m only technically a hero... Oh, actually, I think I remember

hearing about holy swords. Someone from the future had once mentioned that defeating demon lords required a hero skill and a holy sword. At least, I think so.

Prince Leonardo, the Hero of Ice and Snow, had Ascalon.

Maximilian, the Hero of Swaying Trees, had Clarent.

Olga, the Hero of Incandescence, had Balamung.

Gerald, the Hero of Lightning, had Caliburn.

And, Sakurai, the Hero of Light, had Aroundight. Though was that actually a holy sword?

I didn't really remember any of the others, but I knew that most heroes had one. *Okay, so you need a holy sword to fight the demon lords.* Still, that wasn't the main issue here. We had plenty of other things to worry about.

"Does anyone here have a holy sword?" I asked, peering at everyone in turn.

They all looked away sadly.

U-Uh...?

"There are no holy swords here," Johnnie admitted.

Wait, for real?

"My mentor, the Hero of Fire, had one, but..." Abel paused and took a deep breath "It was lost in her battle with Demon Lord Cain."

"Wh-What?!" *That's awful. Does this mean we're doomed to lose?*

"Mel, do you know of any?" I asked.

"Hmm. I am not all that knowledgeable about human weapons."

Well, this was bad. While I was chewing things over, Johnnie broke in.

"Makoto...to answer your earlier question, I will help with your fight against the demon lord. I would like more time, though. We are in the middle of building the town on this layer. The monsters around us are strong, so it is taking more effort than expected. Hence why we need more time."

Ah, so he's worried about his people.

"Elf chief," Mel replied. "Perhaps one of my family could take up residence here? An ancient dragon could ward off any attacking monsters."

Johnnie peered up at her, eyes wide. "You...would do such a thing?"

Nice idea, Mel!

"Although, if one of my kin were to harm a resident...I imagine Makoto would be angry." Mel glanced my way.

“Yeaah. Maybe not the red dragon. He has a bit of a grudge against me.”

“He said he couldn’t stop shaking when he saw you, so it will probably be fine,” Mel reasoned.

“Huh? I didn’t do anything *that* awful, did I?”

Momo sighed loudly. “Sir Makoto...”

What? “I just froze him for a bit.”

“And then tried to sacrifice him!”

“Oh...right.” *Yeah, I did. Guess that would freak anyone out.*

“The town should be finished within a hundred days. After that time, I will come with you to fight the demon lord,” Johnnie stated.

Great! So we would go after Bifrons a hundred days from now. We needed to find a holy sword before then, though. *Hmm, what to do?* It was during times like this when I missed Noah’s guidance. She’d helped me ever since I’d left the Water Temple...but she wouldn’t know me in this era. I slumped in sadness.

“Maybe...” Julietta muttered to herself. It was like she’d just remembered something. “Perhaps we could find a holy sword *there*.”

“Where, Julietta?” I asked.

“Cornet. The capital of Laphroaig.”

Laphroaig! That was Furiae’s homeland. It wouldn’t be a ruin in this time period either. Far from that—it’d be thriving. But...

“Why do you think they have one?” Momo asked.

Good question. Surely if there were rumors about holy swords, the demon army wouldn’t have ignored them?

The Lucy look-alike answered. “The Moon Queen rules Cornet. It is considered a holy ground that the demon lords’ armies cannot touch. Allegedly, they have warriors and legendary weapons capable of standing against the demons.”

A holy ground the demon armies can’t reach... Surely they have to know...or maybe not. In this time period, the truth about Laphroaig had yet to be revealed. Knowing what would happen to Laphroaig...felt really weird.

“No one who has sought aid from the dungeon towns in Laphroaig has ever returned, though,” Volf pointed out. His expression was sour.

“Huh? People have traveled there?” I asked, surprised. *And...for aid?*

Well, I guess that makes sense.

“You’re right, Volf,” Julietta admitted. “Rumors of the capital’s safety are just that—gossip brought by the traveling traders.”

“Huh, you get traders too.” Merchants were still managing to make a living, huh?

Julietta nodded. “We do. They move between towns like ours that are hidden in dungeons.”

“Why do you not seem to know any of this?” Volf asked me, tone incredulous. They all looked confused about my gaps in knowledge.

“Ah.”

Crap. I’d shown how little I understood about this era.

“Do you think someone capable of bringing us down in a single strike—someone like Makoto—would hide away in the dungeons?” Mel asked.

A round of nods followed her question, and people offered their agreement.

Well, that’s not the reason for my ignorance...but it’s a solid guess. Let’s go with that for now. We’ve gotten a bit off topic, though. Time to focus on planning our next moves.

“Johnnie, you’re fine with joining us in battle a hundred days from now, right?” I asked.

“Hm... I suppose the fight is decided. I will help.”

“Then in the meantime, we’ll go look for a holy sword in Laphroaig. Mel, do you know the place?”

“I know most places. I shall take you.”

“Please do.”

Great! Our next destination was set. We were off to the not-yet-destroyed capital of Laphroaig, Cornet. And according to legend, it was ruled by the Witch of Calamity.



We were currently sitting on Mel’s back as she flew through the sky. “We” consisted of Abel, Momo, and me. The four of us—including Mel, of course—were the ones leaving Labyrinthos. Julietta had wanted to come too, but Mel had said, “Too many people will slow me down,” so she had tearfully given up.

I felt kinda bad about leaving her...but Mel was giving us a ride, so I couldn't really protest.

"We're so high up!" Momo cheered.

Abel was wide-eyed. "This looks amazing! I can't fly this high on my own!"

"Mm-hmm, it is indeed amazing," Mel replied, sounding a bit smug at their reactions.

As for me...

Well, the wind was too strong, so I couldn't speak. Uh...was it going to be like this the whole trip?

"Elementalist, shall I slow down?" asked Mel.

"I'd appreciate it," I managed. I guess Mel being the eldest made her the most considerate as well.

Thanks to the slower speed, I could finally join in on the conversation. I did my best not to look down at the ground as I spoke to everyone.

"Have you ever been to Laphroaig?" Abel asked.

I was about to say I had, but I hurriedly stopped myself. "I have not, of course." It wasn't a total lie—I'd been to the *ruins* a thousand years from now. A desolate area of nothingness. "I've actually always wanted to go. According to the rumors, it is the one place that has been kept free of the demon army. I wonder what kind of nation it is."

"Yeah... I've always wanted to visit too." Abel's eyes were sparkling so brightly that I couldn't form a proper reply.

His hope made my chest ache. The reason for Laphroaig's prosperity was that they were working with the demons, and according to the picture book, it was *Abel* who'd discovered that. I wasn't about to leave Abel's side, but I wondered what would happen when he realized...

"Sir Makoto, I can't practice *Fire Magic* up here!" Momo protested.

The wind was strong enough that it was snuffing out her flames. On the other hand, *I* was still able to practice *Water Magic*.

"Then go with something else," I suggested. "You should be able to work with *Ground* or *Wood Magic*."

"Urgh... Couldn't you have given me a break from training while we travel?"

"Hey, it's not like there's anything else we *can* do up here, is there?"

I didn't understand my apprentice sometimes. *Even though she'll be the*

Grandsage in the future...

That thought made me realize something important.

“Mel, can you teach Momo *Teleport*?” I yelled over the wind.

“Hm? You want me to teach? I do not mind.”

“What brought that on?” Momo asked.

“I can’t teach it to you, but your *Sage* skill means that you should be able to use it.” A thousand years from now, she’d be one of the best *Teleport* users on the continent. So she should already have the ability right now.

“Then I shall instruct you in *Fate Magic* while we are free,” said Mel.

“R-Right. I’ve got two teachers now...”

“I have never taught a human—pardon, a half vampire—before.” Mel laughed. “I’ll have you know that I am a strict instructor.”

Momo flinched. “Urk... Be gentle?”

Mel was really caring—she acted like a reliable older sister. The ancient dragons of Labyrinthos adored her. *That’s a ten-thousand-year-old dragon for you. She glares when you talk about her age though...so I’d best not say that aloud.*

“Makoto, what should *I* do while we’re flying?” Abel asked.

That was honestly a weird question. I could hardly act all high and mighty with the legendary savior. Also...

“I’m not a swordsman,” I replied, “so I don’t have the skill to teach you anything.”

“I...see.” He deflated, looking kinda bummed out.

Suddenly, I remembered a conversation I’d had a while back with Fujiyan.



“Are you listening, my esteemed Tackie? When three or more friends gather, commonalities are important. You and I are content to discuss games, but if someone in our midst was unfamiliar with them, they would feel alienated. Having other topics to discuss is vital.”

“I get it.” Fujiyan was great socially, so that was solid advice.

“Therefore, I shall expound upon the virtues of animal-eared girls!”

Or...not. Apparently he just wanted to talk about his hobbies. Guess that advice was less helpful than I’d thought.

“Would anyone interested in girls like that *not* be into games? I mean, it’s kind of a stereotype.”

“Hm... I suppose you may be right.”



That conversation had just been pointless chatter. Back then, I hadn’t come any closer to “understanding the virtues of animal-eared girls.” That aside, Fujiyan’s initial advice was relevant to this situation—the three of us had been talking about magic, and Abel hadn’t known enough about the topic to join in. That wasn’t good.

“Could you teach me *Sun Magic*?” I asked. “I acquired the skill recently, but I’m not used to it yet.”

“You...want me to teach?” Abel beamed. “Okay! Leave it to me.”

That was the right choice. Thanks, Fujiyan.

“Can you give me some advice on my spells?”

“R-Right now?!” Abel sputtered.

“You three, don’t fail your casts while you are on my back,” Mel warned.

◇ Hero Abel’s Perspective ◇

As night fell, an exhausted Mel landed, and we made camp. Makoto caught some fish from the nearby river, and Momo cooked dinner for us. I tried to help—Makoto just waved me off and told me to rest. I had nothing to do.

Once we’d all eaten, it was time to schedule when we’d each take watch for the night.

“Abel, you go ahead and sleep first,” Makoto said.

“You’re swaying, Sir Makoto,” Momo pointed out. “You should rest.”

“Elementalist, you are the most tired. Rest,” said the white dragon.

“Okay...”

He’d been riding on Mel’s back like the rest of us, but that had apparently taken up quite a bit of his stamina. He was asleep as soon as his head hit the bedroll.

“Me too!” Momo exclaimed. She quickly crawled under his blankets,

and in moments, she'd dozed off, a happy look on her face. *She's like a girl getting spoiled by her big brother.*

Only Mel and I were left awake. Currently, she was wearing her human form. No conversation blossomed between us. It was *intensely* awkward.

Eventually (and fortunately), she broke the silence.

"Out of curiosity...why are you in your avian form? Surely you should be hiding it?"

"Those in our camp already know my secret," I replied. "Also, it's easier to spend the night in this form. Though I spend the day as a man..."

"Hmm, part of your mixed heritage? That sounds rather difficult to deal with."

"It is... I need to constantly make sure my secret remains hidden. It's been so long since I've been able to exist in my natural form like this."

As I spoke, I watched Makoto's face. It hadn't been that long since we'd met, but he'd constantly surprised me. I'd found myself caught in his wake. *If I just put my trust in him...everything will work out.* My thoughts naturally drifted in that direction.

"This man is...at risk," the dragon mumbled to herself.

I thought I'd misheard her for a moment. *Makoto is at risk? Even though he's so strong?*

I glanced at her, surprised. She stared back.

"What, human hero?" She smirked. "Do you not feel the same? Are you just assuming that everything will work out if you simply follow him?"

I jumped. It felt like she was staring into the depths of my mind...but I didn't say anything to confirm or deny her suspicions.

Why had she said something like that?

"Lady dragon... Please, explain—what do you mean?"

"Not so loud," she scolded. "You will wake them. This is...fundamentally my own assumption, and not necessarily correct. Do you still want to know?"

"I do... Please."

"Very well."

And with that, the dragon, rumored to have lived for over ten millennia, began to speak.

"I have lived for thousands of years. I have seen darkness give way to light—and vice versa—several times..."

What was she talking about? What did this have to do with that?

She raised her eyebrows. “Your face says that you can’t believe I’m talking about this.”

“N-Not at all!” I floundered, schooling my expression back to something more neutral. *She seems to be able to read me like a book...*

“I shall put it more simply. The demon lords have ruled for over a thousand years. It is nearing time for the Hero of Salvation to appear.”

“Salvation?” I repeated. “I don’t understand.”

“When either the demons or humans rule for a long time, a member of the subjugated race appears to topple the current system. Human and demon regimes alternate over long periods—usually, it takes roughly a millennium for this reversal to occur.”

I fell silent. This was beyond human comprehension—we had the perspective of only one lifetime, a mere hundred years at best. Well, I was technically somewhere between a human and an avian, but my life span wasn’t all that different from a human’s.

“When I met the elemental, I thought *he* was the one.”

Shocked by the dragon’s words, I looked over at Makoto. He would be a savior?! That was incredible! Even a legendary dragon thought this highly of him!

“However, as I have traveled with him...I have gotten the impression that he is living quickly.”

“Living...quickly?”

“You could say that he is...rushing, I suppose. It seems to put him in a precarious situation.”

Now that I thought about it, I could see the logic to what she was saying. Since we’d first met, Makoto had been bold—he’d declared that we would defeat the demon lords and Iblis. Everyone had been aghast and shocked at first. However, he had shown the strength to back up his words. He defeated one of the demon lord’s generals and even repelled Cain. The white dragon herself recognized his strength.

All of those miraculous feats had kept me from realizing something—he never seemed to take a break. According to Momo, he even trained in his sleep. He often looked exhausted but was still pushing himself so hard...despite how strong he already was. I’d even asked him if he actually needed to train so much, but he’d replied that he wasn’t training *enough*.

And when asked what *that* meant, he'd just said that he wanted to get his mastery up another point.

That was all? Once you were above fifty mastery and could cast without an incantation, there wasn't really much point to training it... *Yet for the time I've known him, I don't think I've really seen him take a break.* I'd gotten used to the sight. Could you call that "rushing"?

"Can I speak honestly?" the white dragon asked.

"About...what?"

"I feel like he could defeat a demon lord, even now."

"Wha?!" I was shocked. He could defeat a demon lord?!

While I was reeling from the shock, she continued, sighing deeply. "You are far too open, human hero."

"Huh?"

"I will tell you one thing. Despite the years I have lived, I do not possess the strength to be called a demon lord. I am weaker than a demon lord, and weaker than the elementalists. You should not take my perspective as certain truth."

"R-Right..." Despite her claims, they were all far stronger than *me*, so I couldn't help but believe her.

"This estimation is from my own limited perspective, but...while I believe Makoto could best a demon lord, I do not think he can measure up to Iblis."

My entire body tensed. Iblis. That was the being who ruled even the rulers of this world. The being which they all obeyed. Their god.

"Have you...ever met Iblis?" I asked.

"I have. Once."

"What is he like?" I could barely imagine it. After all, I didn't even have the courage to face one of the normal demon lords.

"It brings me fear to even recall. That *thing* should not reside here...and I want nothing to do with it." The dragon's voice shook as she spoke. "And that's why...I want to gather power slowly, without rushing. You are this party's only hero, no?"

"I..." Well, I did have the skill *Hero of Lightning*. I also had—though I hadn't yet told Makoto—the *Sun Priestess* skill. Telling anyone that I was a priestess would've revealed that I was a woman though, so I'd kept it a secret.

Because of these two skills, I'd been raised as something special my whole life. My parents had treasured me and my skills. I could barely remember them, though. The demon lords had taken my parents from me when I was still young.

The next person who'd thought I was worthy was my mentor, the Hero of Fire. She'd been convinced that I would one day save the world. But she had also died to a demon lord. My heart had shattered into pieces...and all I'd been able to do was run away. Even when Demon Lord Cain, the one who'd slain her, had appeared in Labyrinthos...I had been useless. Weak.

I am...so weak.

"I...could never be like Makoto. I can't...be that strong."

Mel shook her head. "Don't concern yourself with that."

"Huh?" She'd cast aside my worries with only a few words.

"The elemental has an Undyne serving him. Even one of them could destroy a country. And in Labyrinthos, he summoned *five*. If he ever cuts loose, he'll bring the continent below the waves."

"Th-That's a bit much." I laughed dryly. *Surely that's an exaggeration...right?*

"Well... Saying the *continent* will sink might be overstating things. Still, the power behind his magic is immense."

She certainly didn't sound like she was joking. I remained silent.

"I know the legends of elemental magic," she continued, "but this is the first time I have seen that power used. I knew that elves and dwarves maintained the skill to manipulate the elementals, but for as long as I have lived, there have been none capable of commanding the arch elementals. No, even during my parents' era, there were none so powerful."

The white dragon had lived for ten millennia...and even *she* was saying that...

"What in the world is he?" I murmured.

Suddenly, she fell silent.

"Lady dragon?" I asked.

"I shouldn't say."

"Huh?"

"Someone's watching. It must be the Undyne. Though, she could do that in the open..."

Oh, you noticed me. No need to be too open about my liege.

Dia suddenly appeared out of nowhere. She was faintly transparent, and she had less mana coming off her than usual.

“You’re holding yourself back,” the dragon said smugly. “Did the elemental scold you?”

There was a pause as Dia pouted. “I’ve been forbidden from using my power without permission. But I was only trying to help.”

Apparently the answer to Mel’s question was “yes.”

“Hero, if you want to know his true identity, ask him yourself.”

I sighed. What did she mean by that?

“Well, I can probably say *this* much.” The dragon was silent for a moment. She then began speaking slowly, seeming to choose her words carefully. “Manipulating the power of an elemental wears away at a human’s soul. It uses their life span.”

“Their life span?!” I yelped without thinking.

“Elemental magic is strong enough to bring countries to ruin. Did you think that power cost *nothing*?” Mel asked.

“B-But Makoto hasn’t said anything about that,” I protested.

“He has not... But I know it to be true.”

Dia then piped up from next to us. “My liege doesn’t worry about that.”

I jolted. *So it’s true? Dia might as well have confirmed it.* Makoto was using his *life span* to fight? How could I have been so blind...?

“That is a problem, isn’t it, Hero?” asked Mel.

I nodded. “I-It is.”

“Do you think he should continue fighting alone?”

“He...” Well, the answer to that was definitely *no*. He was using up his life itself to protect Momo and me. I couldn’t just let him keep doing that. “I’ll help him. I might not have the power now...but I’ll get strong enough to support him.”

“Good.” Mel smiled at me gently. “And if he starts pushing himself too hard, then he should be warned. His comrades should be the ones to warn him, no?”

Right! I’ll stop him the next time he starts acting rashly! That is...if I can. His spell had knocked me out in Labyrinthos, so I wasn’t exactly sure about managing him on my own...

“U-Um...” I stammered. “I want the two of you to help me too.”

“I cannot,” the dragon declared bluntly.

Wh-What?! Why?!

“The ancient dragons do not cross those who defeat them,” she explained, her expression serious. “I lost to him, so I will not go against his wishes.”

Ah. I’d heard something about that before. If you could force an ancient dragon to admit defeat, they would obey you.

“So that’s why you listen to him,” I muttered.

She snorted derisively. “It is just my pride. The years make us stubborn.”

“I am enough for my liege!” Dia exclaimed suddenly. “I will support him. He doesn’t need anything else!”

“You and the little vampire cannot find fault in him,” Mel pointed out. “You both practically spur him on.”

“It’s not like it matters...” said Dia.

“This is why I’ve always said elementals are empty-headed. They don’t think things through.”

“What was that?!”

The white dragon ignored Dia’s anger. Instead, she looked meaningfully at me. “The elemental...seems to respect you. He may act somewhat reserved, but...he is likely to listen to your words. You can act as his restraint.”

“He...listens to me?” He *was* always considerate of me, but I thought that was because I was unreliable. *He respects me?*

“Besides, unless I am mistaken, someone else has filled that role in his life before now. Otherwise, I do not think he could have survived this long.”

“Someone else...has been supporting him?” I asked.

“It is how the world works. Partings are aplenty. Perhaps his fervor to defeat the demon lords is his attempt at revenge. Maybe they have taken someone precious from him...”

Had he also lost someone dear to him? *No... That’s not it.*

“He said one of the goddesses gave him his mission,” I said.

“Yet he is not one of the Sacred Deities’ believers. Indeed, he is not a disciple of *any* deity.”

“Well...” She was right. He had claimed to be on a mission from the goddess, but he wasn’t part of Althena’s faith. I knew that because of my *Appraisal* skill.

Many mysteries surrounded Makoto.

“You should find out more about him,” the dragon said. “Support him too. Not as I do—subservience due to defeat—nor as the Undyne here does. Also not as the little vampire does. You alone can act as his equal.”

“R-Right...” My heart skipped a beat as she said that. I felt like I knew him, and I trusted his strength. That faith had made me assume everything was fine.

But I hadn’t known...that he was throwing his life away to protect us. Whether his protection of me came from a divine decree or something else, I didn’t know.

I looked at his face. He was sleeping peacefully, features relaxed. As he dozed, not a single muscle twitched. And watching him...I felt my heart speed up.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

“Let’s practice *Sun Magic*, Makoto!” Abel exclaimed.

“S-Sure.”

This—Abel starting up conversations—had become a much more common occurrence since yesterday. This was our second day of travel. The weather had turned foul though, so we’d landed early and made camp.

We’d wandered a bit, looking for shelter from the driving wind and rain, but Mel had declared it a bother—she’d used her magic to create a house. *That’s crazy convenient!*

Once we’d finished eating, we had some free time—well, training time.

Mel was currently speaking to Momo. “Come on, little vampire—time to practice teleporting. First, you need to correctly envision both your current location and your destination’s coordinates. If you fail, you will send yourself off into the sky.”

“I-I don’t know what you mean!” Momo protested.

“First, I shall demonstrate. Then you will follow suit.”

“What?! You’re not going to explain?!”

“Don’t think! Feel!”

“I caaaan’t!”

Mel had taken up the mantle of Momo’s teacher. I had no clue about the higher levels of *Fate Magic*—including the use of *Teleport*—but it sounded

like Mel was really getting into it. I was jealous.

“Makoto, I’ll use *Synchro* with you and cast some *Sun Magic*. Focus on how it feels.”

“R-Right, Abel.” Abel was right next to me, and I was somewhat taken aback at the difference in behavior compared to yesterday.

“Wrong, Makoto.”

“Huh?”

“I said you should call me Anna when I’m like this, didn’t I?”

“R-Right. Okay then, Anna.”

“Good! I look forward to working with you,” Abel—or rather Anna—smiled as she stood in front of me.

That’s right—Abel was in her female body right now.

“Why...that body?” I asked.

“I can use magic better like this.”

“The avians are a race that excel at magic,” Mel remarked from where she was tutoring Momo. “Not even the demons outclass them.”

“Huh...” *Mel sure knows a lot.*

Anna stood in front of me, her wings spread. I’d thought so before, but she was practically the spitting image of Princess Noelle. She didn’t speak or act the same, but I couldn’t help but think of the princess whenever I looked at Anna. It was rather awkward.

“Is there something on my face?” she asked.

“Ack...” Damn, I’d been staring. After a moment of hesitation, I decided to answer honestly.

“You look a lot like someone I know.”

“Someone you know?” she repeated.

I wasn’t lying. I wasn’t able to admit that said acquaintance was her descendant...but still.

Anna hummed, tapping a finger on her cheek. *She really does seem different when she’s Anna rather than Abel.*

Anna seemed to think of something, and her smile took on an impish air.

“Is this ‘someone’ I look like, perhaps, a lover?” Her gaze searched my own.

“Wha?!” Momo yelled. “Sir Makoto?! What’s this about?!”

“Little one! We’re training.”

Momo didn’t listen to Mel’s admonition—she bounded over to us. “So

you like beauties like Anna?!” she demanded, closing in on me.

“M-Momo?! I’m not beautiful,” Anna protested, obviously flustered.

Though I did agree that Anna was beautiful, Momo was jumping to conclusions about the rest.

“Anna looks similar to my friend’s fiancée,” I told them.

“Oh... That’s all?” Anna muttered. Apparently, she was somewhat let down by that answer.

“O-Ohhh. I see. You don’t have a lover, huh?” Momo asked.

She let out a looong sigh. *Rude.*

“What?” I asked. “I do.”

I’d promised to come back for Lucy, plus I had Sasa, Sophia, and Princess... More than a few, actually. I managed to keep the names and numbers to myself, though.

Mel, Momo, and Anna practically gaped at me.

What?

“Makoto...not that I’m doubting you...but do you really?” Anna asked.

“Why’d you ask?”

“Well...” Anna looked like she couldn’t quite bring herself to say.

I’m not lying! I mean, a thousand years from now, I’m a State-Authorized Hero. That should make me pretty popular...I think.

“She wants to know how you have a lover when you’re a virgin,” Mel explained absently.

“Wha?!” How’d she know?!

“Right! Teacher Mel told me about vampires! Your blood tastes great! It’s got a mellow scent and feels like velvet on the tongue—that’s the taste of a virgin!”

“Oy,” I retorted crankily. But...there was nothing else I could say. She didn’t need to be so obtuse about it! Also, velvet?! Who was it? Who tainted Momo?! I glared at Mel, and she looked away.

“That’s right.” Dia nodded solemnly. “My liege is of pure body. He hasn’t done anything like that.”

They all...! Even with *Calm Mind*, I was shocked. “How do you all know?!” I shouted. This was the loudest I’d been since arriving in this era. My exploits, or lack thereof, had leaked *somehow*... I soon found out the following:

Knew through *Appraisal*—Mel and Anna.

Knew from my blood—Momo.

Knew...somehow—Dia.

Also, Dia, what is “knew...somehow” even supposed to mean?!

“D-Don’t be angry...” Anna whispered.

I slumped over, then took a deep breath. “I’m not angry.”

After a moment, I managed to overcome the shock and carry on with training. Things were silent for a while before I started the conversation again.

“It’s not fair that you found out my secret,” I complained to Anna. “You should tell me yours.”

“My secret?” she asked. Her eyes were flitting around in a panic.

“U-Umm... W-Well, I have the *Sun Priestess* skill!”

“Oh, I see.” I already knew that. Well, a thousand years from now, even children knew that.

“You’re not surprised at all!”

“What else?” I pressed.

“Uh...you want something else?”

“Would you tell me what skills you have?” I asked. “All of them.” I wanted to hear, from her own mouth, what skills she possessed as both Anna and Abel.

“I-I suppose so?”

She proceeded to list a whole parade of powerful skills.

“Aaand that’s all,” she finished.

“You don’t have any others?”

“Huh? No, that’s all of them...?”

“Could you check again? Look closely at your Soul Book,” I insisted.

“O-Okay, I will... What?!” Her eyes opened wide. “*H-Hero of Light*? What in the...?”

“So you *do* have it.”

When Abel had broken Cain’s armor, his blade had been glowing with prismatic light. That glow was proof of a divine rank or equivalent attack. According to what Althena had told me, only the Hero of Light could use that skill.

“Makoto!” She rounded on me, her eyes menacing and accusatory.

“How did you know I had a new skill?!”

“Hm? Uh...Althena told me.”

“Do you think I’ll believe *anything* if you use the excuse that the goddess told you?!”

“No, I don’t think that,” I said stiltedly. Admittedly, because she was so innocent, I *had* kinda assumed that I could blame everything on the revelation from Althena.

“Makoto, did Althena really give you a revelation? You aren’t hiding anything from me?”

For some reason, her accusations kept coming. *Not good.*

“Well, couldn’t you ask her? You’re the Priestess of the Sun, right?” A priestess could hear the voice of their goddess. And I definitely *had* been given the revelation from Althena...a thousand years from now. Asking the goddess personally would clear things up.

“I...can’t.”

“Why?” I asked her this, though I already had my suspicions about the answer.

“The *Clouds of Darkness*. They’re covering the sky, and I can’t hear her unless the sun reaches me... I’m a useless priestess.” She slumped over, despondent.

“Well then, guess there’s not much we can do,” I replied as brightly as possible. “Ask her if you get the chance—I definitely *did* receive a revelation from her. For now, I’ll just have to ask you to trust me.”

“Right...”

“We’re off topic. Let’s carry on training,” I suggested.

It was a good thing Anna didn’t realize what that new skill of hers meant. Then again, being the Hero of Light when there was no sunlight was like having a car with no fuel. *We’ll have to drop it for now.*

“Um...about my secret...” Anna murmured, coming in close. Her face was red.

“Eh, it’s fine. You told me your skills, so we’re even.”

“No...I feel bad for finding out a *personal* secret of yours...”

“You don’t need to.” After all, the Grandsage, Mel, and Dia had found out too. It’d be pointless to worry about Anna knowing when everyone else did as well...ha ha.

“Well...I don’t have any experience either,” she admitted.

I looked at her questioningly for a moment. Her meaning wasn’t clicking in my brain.

“I’m...a virgin too,” she whispered, right into my ear, her face now bright crimson.

Saint?! What are you saying?!

“We match,” she concluded.

I gave a shaky nod. “O-Okay.”

“Sh-Shall we get back to training?!”

“Y-Yes!”

The rest of our practice that day was rather awkward.

The rain had eased off by morning, so we continued traveling. After several hours, we spotted our destination from atop Mel’s back.

“Let’s land here,” the dragon suggested. We did just that.

Using *Clairvoyance*, I could see walls in the distance. The walls looked new, but I nonetheless recognized the area. In the future, it had just been wide plains and ruins. But standing before us now was a huge walled city and a gorgeous castle.

We had arrived in Laphroaig’s capital, Cornet.

Chapter 6: Makoto Takatsuki in Laphroaig

“So that’s the capital...”

I was staring at the first large human settlement I’d seen since arriving in this era. The walls weren’t all that high, so it didn’t look particularly protected.

“Let’s go, then.”

“Wait,” Abel—currently in his male form—grabbed my hand.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Have you forgotten what Julietta said? Our comrades who ventured to Cornet never came back. We should find out what the situation is first.”

“Ah, yeah.”

He was right—observing was one of the basics of adventuring. You needed to investigate a place before delving in.

Dia suddenly appeared before us. “It’s fiine, my liege! If anything happens, I’ll deal with it.”

“No, Dia,” Abel protested. “I know how strong you are, but violence doesn’t solve everything.”

“Oh, are you lecturing me, human? Considering you couldn’t even stand the side effects from— Ah! Don’t look at me like that, my liege! I was kidding!”

I rebuked her for being so rude, then turned back to Abel. “Sorry about her.”

Honestly, I thought she had a point—with her power on our side, it would all work out. Still, I couldn’t ignore what Abel had said. Besides all that...wasn’t it my style to be cautious and take things slow? When had I gotten so flighty?

Ah, but...

“Makoto, you always act so rashly!” was the admonishment I always received from Noah, wasn’t it? Well, I couldn’t hear her guiding me

anymore.

I'll be careful, I apologized mentally.

"Thanks for pointing that out, Abel," I said. "Let's observe the town first."

We set up our positions and watched people as they entered Cornet. I was using *Clairvoyance*, but Mel and the Grandsage could see without the aid of a skill—their eyes were just that impressive. Asking them had probably been a good idea.

"Mel, Momo, what do you think?" I asked.

"People entering the city are barely scrutinized by the guards," Mel replied. "Most just pass right through."

"The only thing is..." Momo paused hesitantly. "Some of those people look almost human, but they aren't. What are they?"

"Probably cambions—a race consisting of mixed blood between humans and demons." Mel glanced at the people once more, and her eyes narrowed. "There are a lot of them, though..."

Yeah. Figures there'd be a ton in Laphroaig.

"Cam...bi...ons..." Abel sounded out, clearly unfamiliar with the word.

"What do you think, Elementalist?" Mel asked.

"Well..."

Despite the question, I actually understood what we were seeing. Back in this time period, Laphroaig had a policy of peace between the races. The idea was that if everyone in the region was a cambion, there would be peace. That was why it wasn't much of a surprise to see so many cambions here.

Unions between demons and humans—who would normally be at each other's throats—were formed due to the Witch of Calamity's *Charm* skill. Her skill could make even the unwilling fall in love, and many "false" couples had birthed cambion babies, flooding the city with them. However, the other three had no idea about any of that, so they were probably confused by it.

Well, nothing ventured... We'd spent roughly half a day watching, so I figured we had enough intel now. *We should be able to slip inside without a problem.*

"To find anything out, we'll need to venture inside the city," I said.

Mel nodded. "I suppose so... If the need arises, I can get you all out."

That was definitely reassuring.

“Then let’s go.” I turned to Dia. “You stay hidden until I call.”

“Fiiine.” She pouted.

And so, we all headed toward the gates of Cornet.

I considered using *Transform*, but they were letting humans and cambions alike pass. Getting caught in disguise would definitely look worse than just trying to walk in. We didn’t try to conceal our identities and just stepped up to the gate.

“Next,” the guard called. “Hm? Haven’t seen you before. A tall woman, two young men, and a girl... What ties you four together? What’re you coming to the town for?”

The questioning sounded more interested than suspicious. I gave the story we’d come up with.

“Al, Momo, and I are siblings. This is our mother. Our father died from an illness, so we came looking for work. May we enter the town?”

Abel was a hero, and potentially known, so we’d given him a false name. The rest of us likely didn’t need to worry.

The guard’s face twisted in sympathy as he gazed at Mel. “I see. That’s awful. Raising three children alone must be difficult. I hope you find work. Thanks to our queen’s protection, Cornet is safe.” He then turned to speak to Abel, Momo, and me. “You three be good for your mother. Here, have some candy.”

“Thanks, mister,” Momo said, grabbing it from him.

This guard sure is a great guy.

“M-Mm-hmm...” Mel’s cheek was twitching. She didn’t seem to be happy about being treated as a mother. Since the dragons had called her “mother” in Labyrinthos, I’d figured she had plenty of kids...but it turns out she wasn’t even married or anything. I’d asked this a while back, and she’d shot me a murderous glare. It had been...scary. I was never going to ask her again.

Regardless, the four of us got past the gate easily enough.

“So many massive buildings!” Abel exclaimed. “And look at all the food that’s on sale, Makoto!”

Momo’s eyes grew wide. “Wow! All these stores are amazing, Teacher!”

They were both looking every which way. *You guys know you’re showing your bumpkin sides, right?* They could learn a thing or two from

Mel about how to stay cool and collected.

“Oh! What are these products? I have never seen the like!” Mel exclaimed, looking at the stalls with shining eyes.

Right...she had mentioned how she hadn't been up on the surface for centuries. I let out a sigh at their excitement as we strolled through the town. We needed to find lodging before anything else, so we looked around for an inn.

Soon enough, we found one, but had no money for a deposit. The innkeeper asked if we had anything we could exchange, and Mel handed over some magicite.

“That's damn pure!” boomed the innkeeper. “Wait just a minute!” With that, he vanished into the back. Before long, he came back with a huge amount of coins.

“Are you sure?” Mel asked, taken aback.

“Of course. I've even upgraded your room, on the house.”

After that, he showed us to a really nice room. The innkeeper also seemed to be a good man. We stored our luggage in the room and then decided to head back into the town.

Before we left, the innkeeper called out to us.

“You seem new to the town, so I'll let you know—the queen is holding a speech tomorrow morning, so come to the palace courtyard. It's a necessary duty for all who live in Cornet.”

“Got it. Thank you for letting us know.”

Then, we left.

“Hey there, little lady, fancy a look at our wares?”

“We've got stuff for you too, handsome.”

“Madam, would you like to see a dress that would fit you well?”

All of us were getting calls from nearby sellers, but Mel snapped at the person who spoke to her.

“Who're you calling ‘madam’?!”

Uh, did you forget our cover story?

All of us were a little excited, but we managed to explore the town. There was a liveliness in the air. Momo and Abel both seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Our main reason for coming here was to find information on a holy

sword, but that could wait until we visited the bars tonight. I bought food—some skewers—from a nearby stall and sat on a bench to eat them. As I ate, I did some people watching. The biggest demographic was definitely cambions. They all had features that marked them as nonhuman—some had horns, others had odd skin colors, and several even had three eyes.

Everyone seemed friendly, though. There were a lot of children and the elderly. When I asked someone passing by how to get to the castle (just to gauge their reception to interaction with a stranger) they happily answered.

The diversity here felt similar to Roses.

Suddenly, Mel sat herself down next to me.

“I’ll take that,” she said, pulling one of the skewers from my hand. She was the one who’d given us the money to buy them, so I wasn’t going to complain. I’d actually been thinking I’d bought too many anyway.

She bit into the skewer and chewed. “This is good. What meat is it?”

“Wild bison, apparently.”

“Hm... I’ll have to hunt one at some point.”

“This place uses a secret sauce—it won’t taste the same if you make them yourself.”

“I see. A shame.”

This was a meaningless conversation—we needed to make sure no one thought anything of our chatter.

Mel lowered her voice to a whisper. “Have you noticed the curse?”

“I have,” I murmured back. “*Charm*, right?”

“Indeed. I sense the presence of demons as well. None should be living with humans, and yet they have formed families. The curse envelops the town as a whole... It’s rather impressive.”

“It’s the Priestess of the Moon—this country’s queen.” Also called the Witch of Calamity, she ruled over Laphroaig.

“You know her?” Mel asked.

I shook my head. “Hardly. That comes later.”

“Your words are as confusing as ever... Just who are you? You are hiding your allegiance to the old gods, but...”

I thought briefly, considering my goal and the fact that I’d come from the future. *Maybe I can tell Mel about it? She’s definitely discreet.*

“Well, Mel, I—”

“Wait, not here.”

I looked at her questioningly.

“I do not personally mind whether I hear your secret, but I think you should tell the others. We are a team, are we not? An imbalance in the team will create strife, will it not?”

I fell silent at her warning. *She’s right, though...*

“What I most want to know,” she continued, “is if this team can defeat Iblis. Do you think it can?”

“I guarantee it.”

“Hm. I wonder why you are so certain. Well...no matter. I am looking forward to it.”

“Right.”

The conversation had made me think of Noah again.

After playing in—that is *exploring*—the town, Abel and Momo came back. We went back to the inn for a while and then headed out to the bars to hunt for information.

Almost everything we heard was about how nice it was to live in Cornet, how wonderful the queen was, and how safe everyone felt here. Well, the whole town *was* charmed—they probably wouldn’t know much useful information.

Suddenly, I heard a voice call out to me.

“Sir Makoto Takatsuki.”

I jolted. *My full name!* I hadn’t uttered “Takatsuki” since I’d arrived here.

Whipping around, I looked for the person who’d called to me. There—someone with their head covered. I didn’t recognize them.

“Would you come this way? My...*lady* is waiting.”

Mel and I exchanged looks...and then followed.

“This way, Sir Makoto Takatsuki and party,” the hooded person said, leading us farther into the town.

“Are you sure you can trust them?” Abel murmured.

“And are you sure it isn’t a trap?” asked Momo.

“It’s probably fine,” I assured them.

I had some idea what this was about. There was a crest on the back of this person’s hand. Not Naya’s crest—she was the goddess of Laphroaig. Instead...

“Say, Elementalist. Is ‘Takatsuki’ supposed to refer to you?” Mel asked.

“It’s my surname.”

“Oh...you have a surname. Then perhaps you are a noble from the eastern continent?”

“Sorry, ’fraid not.”

“Hm...so that guess is wrong.”

We’d been talking about who I really was, so I suppose my identity was on her mind.

Momo then broke into the conversation. “Why did you hide your surname?”

“Well, there are a lot of reasons. Just keep calling me the same as usual.”

“F-Fine... Ugh, you’re so mysterious.”

I thought I heard Abel mutter, “Another thing he hid that I didn’t know.”

“What was that, Abel?” I asked to make sure.

“N-Nothing!”

Eventually, we arrived at a dingy-looking corner. It felt like we were getting to the slums of the city. The capital near the inn had all seemed bright, but I guess that wasn’t the case everywhere.

The building we’d been shown to was almost falling apart. That was just the outside, though—once we stepped inside, it was all neat and tidy. Lit candles were spaced out, lighting up the area. We proceeded down a corridor, which terminated at a large door.

“She is waiting through here,” the robed woman said before suddenly vanishing.

Anna and Momo looked nervous. Mel looked the same as normal.

I slowly opened the door.

“Hero and party. I have been waiting.”

The inside looked almost like a chapel, and in the farthest spot from the door, a woman was standing on a dais. She looked to be in her late teens. Her frame was petite, but she was good-looking and her features seemed almost doll-like. Her eyes were cold as they stared down at us. Though this was the first time we’d met, she still seemed familiar.

“I’m Makoto Takatsuki,” I said, slowly stepping closer.

“Yes, I know. I have heard of you from Ira. I am the Priestess of Fate, Estelle.”

Abel and Momo looked shocked.

“I thought as much,” Mel remarked.

The Priestess of Fate...Estelle. Even her name was the same. Maybe it was passed down with the title through the generations?

"Please, take a seat."

I followed the request and sat in the pew closest to the front. Momo sat next to me, but she was stiff with nerves.

Now that we'd finally managed to meet, I had so much to ask her.

"Ah... I'd like to speak to Ira, so—"

"Wait a moment," Estelle said, cutting me off. "The hero comes first." She walked over to Abel. "Hero Abel. It has been a hard journey. I am glad to see you here safe."

"Th-Thanks... Makoto helped me when we were in danger."

"Hold out your hand."

Abel did as he was told, and Estelle put her hand in his for several seconds. *What's she doing?*

"Hm, I see."

"Um, Priestess?" he asked quizzically. Estelle ignored him and turned to Momo.

"Next, little sage. You have suffered much as well."

"I-I have...but I was with Sir Makoto!"

"I see. That is good to hear." She smiled. "You have a good teacher." She lightly touched Momo on the head.

"Finally, White Dragon Helemmelk."

"Yes, Priestess."

Mel seemed oddly nervous. *Actually, what does she mean by "finally"? What about me?!*

"Ira has aided me once before," said Mel.

"Indeed, she remembers it well. She is overjoyed to see the young dragon become so wonderful."

"I thank you for your words..." Mel murmured, her voice quavering slightly.

Oh, so she knew Ira. I was glad we were talking about her, then. Estelle held Mel's hand for a second like she had Abel's, then stepped back up onto the dais. She didn't approach me at all.

"Um, Lady Estelle?"

"Just wait calmly," she snapped.

I let out a sigh. *Pissed her off, I guess.* Still, she didn't need to sound so

harsh. Although, was she...?

“Now, I am sure you are all hesitant about your equipment in regards to facing the demon lords. I have prepared replacements for you. Take what you like.”

At that, several robed people appeared and started laying out weapons, shields, and armor. *Oh wow...this is definitely a turning point.* The equipment gleamed in front of us. *Is that mythril?*

“Whoa...”

“Wow! Teacher Mel, your eyes are shining!”

“Now these...”

Abel, Momo, and Mel’s eyes were all wide. That was nice—maybe I could pick something too.

I started to wander over to them, but a tugging at my sleeve stopped me.

“Lady Estelle?”

“Makoto Takatsuki...I have other business with you. Come this way.”

“Just me?” I asked.

“Yes, just you. Hurry.” At that, she disappeared into another room.

“Wow! This cloak has protection from four elements!” Abel exclaimed.

“It is woven from the mane of the Heaven Lion. It is a legendary item. Take it, Hero,” Mel insisted.

“I-It’s *what*?!”

“Teacher Mel, this staff has so much mana...”

“It is made from the world tree. Those who possess little mana couldn’t cope with its power, but you might be fine with your *Sage* skill.”

“Th-The world tree in the legends?!” Abel asked in shock.

“Indeed. There is a sapling on the floating continent. Surely it is not that shocking? I’m honestly impressed. This staff must have taken much effort to craft.”

“You know everything!”

“Not everything.”

The three of them sounded so happy. Mel was explaining all the items. She sure knew a *lot*, if not everything. I wanted to see the weapons and armor, but...

“This way, Sir Makoto Takatsuki. The priestess is waiting.”

“Understood,” I answered the robed person, giving up and moving through the door.

This room was small and had no windows. The priestess was standing with her back to the entrance.

“Close it,” she ordered.

“Of course,” the robed person said, closing the heavy door.

It thudded shut. The room was completely private now. *This is pretty intense. It's not a trap...right?* I was a bit nervous now.

“Um... Priestess? What did you—”

“Makoto Takatsukiiii!”

I didn't manage to finish before being engulfed in a hug by the Priestess of Fate.

The priestess might have been fairly petite, but the force behind her leap carried me to the floor.

“I'm so glad you're safe! I was worried!” She sat on top of me, running her small hands through my hair.

“Ummm, Prie— Actually, you're Ira, aren't you?”

She giggled. “That's right! It's been a while, Makoto Takatsuki. Oh, perhaps my presence has not quite hit home in this form.”

Estelle snapped her fingers. Instantly, she was enveloped in light, and when it faded, Estelle's body had been replaced with the form of a beautiful goddess with sparkling pink hair. There was no mistaking her—this was Ira.

Meeting someone from my own time period filled me with unexpected relief. I relaxed slightly, and without even thinking about it, a complaint flew from my lips.

“What was the deal with that frosty reception?”

“Huh? Weeeell, I was just so happy! I was trying super hard not to smile.”

You were holding in a smile?! And here I was, worried I'd pissed her off.

“I'm relieved too,” I admitted. “I don't know anyone in this era.”

“I have...placed a heavy burden on you.” Her arms tightened around me, and the hug pressed my face further into her chest. *Unlike Noah or Eir, there's no padding...*

“I will even overlook that disrespectful thought.”

I paused for a moment, then flatly said, “Pardon me.” *It's been a while since anyone's read my mind.* “Still, I'm impressed you knew I was here.”

“I didn't,” she said simply.

“Huh?”

“Well, you aren’t a believer of the Sacred Deities, are you? So we can’t see your future. Hero Abel is another matter, though—they are the hero of the Sun Goddess and her priestess. So, I could use my *Future Sight* and determine that they would be in Laphroaig. And in the original history, Hero Abel traveled to Laphroaig much later, so I could assume that you were involved in this change of plans.”

I see...but...

I couldn’t keep my complaints bottled up. “Then you could have contacted me sooner.”

“Could you be less absurd? Barely anyone believes in the Sacred Deities during this period, so we have hardly any power. Even so, once I knew Hero Abel was coming, I hid myself and waited. Creating this hideout was such a huge risk.”

“Well...thanks...” I murmured sheepishly. Hearing that, I felt a bit embarrassed about my demands. She was right—we were smack-dab in the middle of enemy territory. *I ought to be grateful that she waited here for us.*

Ira nodded. “As long as you understand.”

“I do. So...” I squirmed a little. She was still on top of me. “Could you let me up?” I dreaded to even think what Momo would say if she saw us like this.

“Ah, I suppose,” she said, as if she’d just noticed how close we were.

I faced her again. *There’s so much I want to talk with her about—where should I start?* “Ira...you have your memories of the future, right?”

“I do. I know that you were Noah’s believer, and that you were the Hero of Roses.”

That was good to hear. Something else was confusing me, though.

“When did we first meet? Did you already know me before we spoke in Highland?”

I remembered talking to Estelle—with Ira in the driver’s seat—for the first time in Highland Castle. Back then, she certainly hadn’t acted like she knew me.

“Ah... Are you worried about time paradoxes? That’s not how it works. We first met a thousand years later in Highland—that is how you should understand it. I have both my memories of the future and the past, but only glimpse the countless possibilities of the future. Now that you have been sent to the past, there is a mix of original history and altered history. Even

among the goddesses, only *I* can observe all of it. Infinite futures lie before us, and the past is not fixed. The flow of time is convoluted.”

“I-I understand.”

I didn’t understand at all.

“Hey, I already told you! You don’t need to think about it. That’s my job.”

At least I could understand that. *All I need to worry about is saving the world with Abel.*

Suddenly, Ira seemed to notice something. She peered curiously at my face. “Makoto Takatsuki...there are issues with your stats’ display.”

“My stats?”

“There are things I cannot read... Perhaps due to my use of time travel.”

“Is this...going to influence me physically?” I immediately checked my Soul Book. *Nothing’s really looking weird on my end.*

“I am unsure whether even *Appraisal* can identify your stat information correctly. It will appear as if the reading has been obstructed.”

“Well, that’s not a problem.” I could always check my Soul Book, after all. Although, I hadn’t really looked at anything but my proficiency lately. Wait. Actually, something didn’t add up.

“Um...? Mel and Abel both used *Appraisal* to pry the other day...”

“Pry?”

“Yeah, uh...about my *experience* and such...”

The embarrassment was mere days old and it returned full force.

Ira snorted at that. “*That* information still appears—loud and clear. It plainly states ‘zero people,’ virgin.”

“Did you have to actually say it?!”

“What are you even playing at? You’ve got so many lovers in the future, and you *still* haven’t sealed the deal. That’s not a good look, even in your old world, is it?”

Well...I’d been focused entirely on training. I’d missed the chance. It’s not like I ever expected to end up a thousand years in the past!

Ira must have read those thoughts, since her expression softened. “That Momo seems to have taken a liking to you.”

“I’m not a pedo.”

“You obsess over the smallest of things.”

“Age is important!” What were we even talking about? “Back on topic.

What should we do now?”

“Fine, let’s get back on track. Thanks to you, Hero Abel still lives. We’ve avoided falling down the dark route of history where humanity is completely subjugated by Iblis. All that’s left is picking the opportune moment for your party to strike. However, history has already changed quite a bit, so the original sequence of events no longer holds.”

“It doesn’t?” I pulled out the picture book and flipped through it again. “Uh, you’re talking about when Bifrons was defeated, right?”

Ira nodded. “That’s right. Originally, he would have already been defeated by now.”

“I noticed that. That’s why I was trying to end him as quickly as I could.”

“And your comrades stopped you, no? I saw Abel’s memories. That was the right choice, though.”

“It was?” I asked.

“Look.” Ira pointed at the book. “How was Bifrons defeated in the original timeline?”

At her question, I read the passage aloud.

Abel the Savior joined forces with many heroes and defeated the Undead King. However, the cost was by no means small. The Hero of Wood, the Hero of Iron, and Hero Abel’s mentor, Olga the Hero of Fire, never returned. Many other courageous warriors of the forest perished as well.

Hero Abel, the White Grandsage, and Spellbow Johnnie survived the fight against Bifrons and retreated into the depths of Labyrinthos to evade Black Knight Cain.

In its depths, the legendary holy dragon—

“It doesn’t really say exactly,” I summed up. “There isn’t anything specific in the book.”

Ira scoffed. “Are you even paying attention? It’s there in black-and-white.”

“It is?”

I tilted my head. The biggest difference was that Bifrons still lived, and the heroes were still around—except Olga, who had already died. I figured I’d kinda taken her place.

“Are you listening? Originally, all of the heroes except Abel—and all of the warriors from Labyrinthos except Johnnie—were wiped out by Cain.”

“Huh?”

“That’s not all,” Ira continued. “Every ancient dragon in Labyrinthos aside from the white dragon was killed by Cain as well. That is how history originally went.”

I fell silent. Memories of my time in Labyrinthos’s dungeon town floated through my mind. All those heroes, and that elf girl, who looked so much like Lucy... In the original timeline, they would’ve all...been dead by now?

They’re still here, I reminded myself. History definitely had changed quite a bit. Even so...

“The situation is better...right?” I asked.

The heroes were obviously strong, and the beastmen and elves that Johnnie led were fierce fighters as well. The ancient dragons were nothing to sneeze at either. We were definitely in a better position with them all still alive. So, the situation *had* to be better in this timeline than in the original one.

However, when I asked my question, Ira’s expression became awkward. *What’s with that look?*

“Um, well... The reason Abel, little Grandsage, Johnnie, and the white dragon defeated Iblis was...they sought revenge for the deaths of their families.”

“Revenge?!” I couldn’t help but shout. *That* was what had motivated the legendary party?

“Indeed. Revenge and hatred. Abel’s hatred at witnessing the death of the hero who’d raised them. The Grandsage’s hatred after watching her mother devoured before her eyes. Johnnie and the white dragon’s hatred over the slaughter of their kin. That was what connected them. *Hatred* fueled them to defeat Iblis.”

Ira glanced my way.

“So I...shouldn’t...have helped them?” I asked.

“No!” she exclaimed. “I prefer that everyone survives! But...I checked their memories when I touched them, and...”

“And?”

“They are all less interested in defeating Iblis than they should be. They

lack morale.”

“Is that...going to be a problem?”

“N-No! I have an idea—leave it to me!” Ira straightened up and threw her shoulders back.

Now I’m feeling even more concerned.

“Why?!” she demanded.

“Well, leaving things to you hasn’t exactly gone well before...”

“Ugh! I haven’t failed yet!”

“Any ‘love children’ from the godking in this time period?” At this point, I’d even take the Hero of the Sun...if he’d help.

“Well, I *did* look. But no, not in this era.”

There wasn’t one? That was a shame. At least she’d looked.

“So, to sum up, you mostly wanted to tell me about how history had changed, right?” I asked.

“Indeed. I can’t tell anyone but you, after all.”

Well, of course.

“Ira, I should be keeping it a secret from the other three, right? I have been so far.”

“Let me think... You can probably tell them that you came from a thousand years in the future, but stay quiet about the fact that you follow the same goddess as Cain. Cain killed Abel’s mother figure in Noah’s name, so that wouldn’t go down well.”

“I’ll keep it to myself.” I had a good connection with Abel right now. There was no point in purposefully damaging that relationship.

“I wanted to praise you as well. You’ve done a superb job.” Ira smiled radiantly, almost like a goddess— Well, she *was* a goddess, so that made sense.

“I’ll do my best to keep it up.”

“Don’t push yourself too far. Your comrades are worried. Incidentally, is there anything you want?”

“Anything I want?”

“Right. I’m weak right now, so it can’t be too much, but I’m forcing burdens on you. I’ll do anything I can to make up for it.”

“Anything?” She did say *anything*, right? Right?

“W-Well,” she sputtered. “I’m the youngest...and weak right now, okay? Don’t ask for anything too big.”

Seems like she backtracked because of my thoughts. Anything extreme was a no-go, then. Hmm...what to ask for?

I covered my mouth with my hand, thinking deeply. Then, I came up with an idea.

“Can I...see Noah?” It all came out in a tumble before I could fully process what I’d said. Ever since arriving in this era, I’d felt alone. Even a glimpse of her would—

“I figured you might ask that.” Ira gazed at me sympathetically.

I had no idea whether this request would be too much for Ira, but judging from what I’d seen Eir do, the goddesses could get in and out of Noah’s prison pretty easily.

“Makoto Takatsuki, your wish...” Ira folded her arms, a conflicted look on her face.

What was she about to say? I waited, heart thumping in my chest.

“It’s just...she’s sooo scary right now.”

“Huh?” I hadn’t expected that. Noah, the kindest woman I could think of, was *scary*?

“She’s only kind to you because you’re her believer,” Ira said. “Also, she’s practically a teddy bear in the future, and Eir can drop in as she likes. In this era, though, I won’t go to the Seafloor Temple unless I have to. I have gotten dragged along before...”

“Oh, right. You don’t get along with Noah, do you?” I’d heard something like that from Eir. My question prompted another awkward look from Ira.

“You...are rather upfront. But you are correct. I don’t get along with her.” Ira paused, then began muttering at a rapid pace. “I’m the youngest of Olympus, and everyone dotes on me, but when Noah is there, they all flock to her... Even though she’s only got her looks and is an awful person...”

“Ummmm, Ira?” I said, interrupting her quiet tirade.

“I was talking to myself. Forget about it,” she ordered.

I let out a sigh.

“And,” Ira continued, “whether we like each other or not is of no consequence. We have different levels of divinity. Noah and Althena are on the same level, so I have nothing on her.”

Another sigh.

“I...get it?”

Not really. But is she saying that Noah is higher-ranking than she is?

“Right. In this time period, Noah is still part of the Wicked Deities. If I mess up, she could send Cain to wipe us out.”

I let that sink in for a moment. “Well, I’d rather pass on that.”

“If you do want to talk to Noah, you should probably go through her believer,” suggested Ira. “Though I’m not sure your hero will let you get away with that...”

“Well, that’s a dilemma.”

Guess I wasn’t going to be able to speak with Noah—at least not easily. Maybe I could just head to the Seafloor Temple on my own?

I slumped in resignation, and Ira stepped in close. Gently, she stroked my cheek.

“Makoto Takatsuki...if you wish, I can bestow upon you the title of *my* hero. That isn’t all—if you are my believer, I will love you with my whole soul.”

“I-Ira...?”

I was taken aback by the change in her tone. I tried to step away, but she wrapped her arms around my waist and pulled me toward her again. Her warm breath ghosted against my ear.

“You’re lonely in this era, huh? I’m the only one here who can understand you, aren’t I?”

“Well...”

She might be right. I wasn’t part of this time period—I was an unknown from a thousand years in the future, an era of peace. Even my value system was different. I could say that we’d defeat Iblis, but barely anyone took me seriously. That was part of why I always felt so alone.

“You’ve done so well on your own. But you’ll reach your limits soon, won’t you? Maybe you should rely on someone?”

“I...”

Until now, I’d had Noah. I’d had Lucy and Sasa. I’d had all my friends to help and support me. Now...I was all by myself, and I *felt* it, just a bit.

She whispered into my ear, her words sweet like honey. “Come on, Makoto Takatsuki...why not convert to me?” Suddenly, a panic-stricken voice cut through the air.

“Y-You can’t, my liege!”

The sudden invader was Dia.

“Oh, Undyne, so you *were* around here,” Ira remarked.

“L-Let him go, Goddess! M-My liege...y-you aren’t planning on abandoning us and—”



“I’m not. Ira is just teasing me.”

At my words, Ira turned me loose and took a step back. “You could at least hesitate to refuse me,” she scolded. “I really went to great lengths with that pitch.”

“Unfortunately, Noah is the only one for me.”

“Meanie.”

I’d been right—Ira was just joking. Still, Dia was being oddly reserved, especially compared to her usual self-importance.

Reading my mind, Ira spoke up.

“It’s her memories from Titanomachia. The elementals are uneasy around us Sacred Deities.”

“Huh.”

“I-I’m not scared! My liege, don’t listen to her smooth talk!”

With that, Dia vanished. Guess she really *was* uneasy around Ira.

“Don’t be too mean to her,” I said to Ira.

“I won’t. Well, things would have been easier if you’d decided to convert, but instead, take this with you.”

She handed over a silver necklace. I peered at it closely and could see something like a charm in the shape of a clock. Scratch that—it actually *was* a clock.

“What’s this?” I asked. “It’s not going to stop time when I wear it or something, right?”

“Sadly, that’s not going to happen. That necklace is a communication device. A direct line to me.”

“A communication device?” That didn’t sound like something from a fantasy world like this. Still, communication, huh? “So I can talk to you whenever I like if I’m wearing this?”

“That’s right. I can’t come with you, so use this to ask me for advice when you need it.”

“Wow!” That was a definite relief. After all, Ira *could* see the future. “I look forward to working with you, Ira.”

“Same here, Makoto Takatsuki. Now, you should return to your comrades.”

“Got it.”

The two of us retraced our steps to the chapel where the others were waiting.

“Sir Makotoooo! Look at this.”

“Momo?” She trotted up to me wearing some kind of thick, robe-looking garment. It jangled when she moved.

“That’ll probably be a bit hard to move in, won’t it?”

“Will it?” she asked, shoulders slumping.

“Looks good on you, though.” She looked cute in her disappointment, so I ruffled her hair.

“Are you done talking, Makoto?” Abel asked.

“You took your time, Elementalist.”

The other two had come up while Momo and I chatted. They both had new equipment of their own, but with less excessive ornamentation.

“We are. Did you find a good holy sword?” I asked Abel.

That’d been our objective, after all, so it was a natural question.

“Well...”

And yet, he didn’t give a proper answer. Uh? But Ira had offered up so many magic weapons.

“Elementalist,” Mel said. “The magic weapons here are all superb, but none of them are holy swords.”

“This mythrill magic sword is what I’ve picked.” Abel gestured to the sword he was carrying. “It’s much better than what I have, but according to the Lady Dragon, it is not a holy sword.”

“I...see...”

I peered at the sword in question. As far as I was concerned, it looked like a really strong magic sword... *So not even this is a holy sword?* Well, now we were stuck.

Luckily, we had a reassuring ally on our side.

“What shall we do?” I asked.

“Hmph, leave it to me.” Estelle—possessed by Ira—puffed her chest up proudly. “Head for Ascareus Sanctus. There exists the sun temple closest to the heavens. You should be able to hear my big sis—ahem, Lady Althena’s voice there, and you will be able to gain the power to defeat the demon lord.”

Her voice was grave. Abel, Mel, and Momo all listened seriously. I was slightly concerned, though. *Ira, didn’t you almost mention your “big sister” just now? You’re letting yourself slip.* I sent these thoughts toward her with a lidded look.

The look—or glare—she returned seemed to indicate that I should ignore it. I guess it'd be fine? *Even though she's an airhead goddess, I trust her words.*

I exhaled a small sigh of lament. At least now I felt far better than when I'd been cast adrift on my own in this era.

Chapter 7: Makoto Takatsuki Meets the Witch of Calamity

Ascareus Sanctus—a mountain with a sun temple at its summit. It was one of the famed places of Althena's faith in Highland. History told of Saint Anna's pilgrimage there to pray for a millennium of peace after defeating Iblis. I was pretty sure it was where Princess Noelle undertook her trials to become a saint too.

I don't remember any tales of Abel's party traveling there in the original history, though. It's not in the picture book, and I didn't remember hearing anything like that at the Water Temple before.

In other words, Ira was writing her own story. Would things work out? I was slightly uneasy, but I glanced at my companions.

"Understood, Lady Estelle!"

"If that is Lady Ira's guidance..."

"A holy mountain...that sounds incredible, Sir Makoto!"

The three of them had sparkling eyes. Well, if they were all up for it, then...sure.

"You should all spend at least a year at Ascareus Sanctus growing stronger," said Ira. "Particularly you two, Hero, Sage."

"A year?!" I exclaimed.

Ira looked at me. "You are rushing too much. Little Momo only became a sage recently, didn't she? You need to train her properly."

I paused for a moment, overruled by what she'd said, then finally conceded. "Understood." Honestly, Ira was right—Momo *didn't* have enough training. There were many abilities that she could practice and develop. I turned to the girl. "Momo, you're going to be getting your magic up to scratch with me for a while, okay?"

"Got it!"

At least she doesn't seem against it.

"Abel, Mel, looks like there's been a change of plans," I said. "Are you

both okay with that?”

“I’ll follow what you say,” Abel replied.

Mel shrugged. “A year is hardly worth calling a delay.”

Guess the other two have no objections either. Now the only thing left to do is let Johnnie know about the delay.

With those plans solidified, I had only one thing on my mind.

“Can I have a look at the magic items too?” I asked eagerly.

“Of course. Take what you like.”

Hell yes! Let’s goooo! There were still plenty of things lined up. I raked my gleaming eyes over them, and Estelle—still possessed by Ira—strolled over.

“What about this?” She pointed. “It’s a Red Feather Cloak.”

“A cloak...? Hm, it looks hard to move in, so maybe not.”

“You should at least try it on first.”

Ira moved her arms around me, draping the cape over my shoulders. Oddly enough, it didn’t feel heavy? Actually, my body felt even lighter than usual.

“Wh-What’s this?”

“It’s imbued with gravity magic. The cloak enables some degree of flight and has protection against arrows and ranged magic. It also makes you lighter, which can lessen the burden of long travel. Impressive, no?”

“It’s amazing!” I exclaimed. It was perfect! Ira had definitely been the one to gather all of these items. *I should take advantage of her advice.* “Is there anything else you’d recommend?”

“Hmm, what about these earrings? They suit you, right?”

“Don’t you think they’re a bit girly? But they are cute though, yes.”

“Right? I designed these. They reduce mana expenditure.”

“Oooh.”

“Go ahead, try them on.”

“I can do it myself,” I protested.

Suddenly, I noticed several pairs of eyes on us.

“Um...you both seem rather close,” Momo remarked with a suspicious look.

“Elementalist.” Mel tilted her head, obviously interested. “Do you know the priestess?”

“N-No!”

“This is the first time we’ve met!”

Both of us hurriedly shook our heads.

“Really? Makoto?” Even Abel was staring at me doubtfully.

I returned my attention to the magical items, and things were a little awkward as I picked several other things that Ira recommended.

“Well, thank you for your help,” I said once we were done.

“Thank you!” Momo chirped.

“Thank you, Lady Estelle.”

“Please convey my regards to your goddess, Priestess.”

Our group then stepped toward the exit of Ira’s hideout. As she watched us leave, she called out to us, her face stern and serious.

“One more thing—there is a daily assembly held by the queen every morning. You’ll be charmed if you go there. So no participating, okay?”

The four of us exchanged glances.

“Makoto, that’s...”

“The innkeeper mentioned that, didn’t he?” I murmured, remembering the conversation from this morning. He’d said something about a daily address from the queen.

“Hmm, so *that’s* how the citizens are charmed...” Mel mused.

“Huh?” Momo’s eyes were wide in shock. “Wh-What do you mean?!”

“Makoto, what are you...talking about?”

Mel had sounded impressed, but the other two were clearly uneasy and unaware of what was really happening in Cornet. Mel and I quickly filled them in.

“Why...” Momo trailed off for a moment. “Why would they do that?”

“I didn’t realize...” Abel said softly.

The two of them were pale-faced.

Ira spoke once more. “Also, the queen knows about every person who enters the city, so those who don’t attend will be reported on. You shouldn’t stay here long. We will be escaping when we find our moment.”

“She knows about us?” I asked, a chill running down my back.

“The queen likely doesn’t know who you are...but she will know you are not charmed. All of the citizens are friendly, right? One casual question, and she will have people searching for you.”

Her pronouncement was met with silence. *That’s way more “Big*

Brother” than expected...

We thanked Ira for the information and then headed back to the inn.

By the time we departed her hideout, it was late into the night. The lighting in the streets had mostly been extinguished, and there were very few people out. Still, it felt like we were being watched.

The lights were still on when we got back to the inn, and the innkeeper greeted us with a smile.

“Welcome back. You were out late.”

“We were. Apologies for keeping you up,” Mel replied.

“Not at all. After all, you only just arrived in Cornet—it makes sense that you’d go looking for some excitement. Although...no place I know of is open at this hour. Where were you?”

I jolted. “Um...”

The conversation with Ira passed through my mind. We couldn’t be careless here.

Before I could come up with any excuses, Mel easily broke in. “She fell asleep, so we let her rest.”

“Ah...yeah. I dropped off,” Momo said childishly.

The innkeeper nodded. “I see. The day must have been tiring. Rest well, young lady. However...the queen’s address is still happening tomorrow morning, so I will wake you up then.”

“G-Got it,” I answered.

That fixed smile hadn’t left the innkeeper’s face. I forced a clumsy smile of my own to finish off the conversation. As we headed for our room, I could feel his gaze on our backs. We climbed to the second floor and entered our room, and only then did I let out a massive breath.

“We need to leave by the morning,” I told everyone. Ira’s words had changed my perspective on the innkeeper’s friendliness—he was absolutely terrifying.

“Indeed.” Mel nodded. “We should avoid the assembly. Let us follow the priestess’s advice.”

“Why...is she doing this?” asked Abel. “Leading a nation or not, surely using *Charm* on them is too much?”

“Well, if it keeps the peace... Though I do not feel it is necessary either.” Mel’s words were heavy.

Momo shuddered out a breath. “I’m scared.”

“It’ll be fine,” I soothed, stroking her head.

We all quickly gathered our belongings, and once everything was together, Abel turned to us. “How are we getting out of the city?”

“The innkeeper is up now, so we’ll sneak out before dawn,” I reasoned. “It will be dangerous getting out of the gates...but maybe Mel could carry us out on her back?”

“Indeed. Do you recall the plaza on the main street we visited this morning? It would be perfect for that. I would have sufficient space, even in my dragon form.”

Ah, yeah—that was where we’d shared skewers on that bench, and it was certainly a large, open plaza.

Our destination’s settled, then.

We took turns sleeping, then sneaked out before dawn. Luckily, we’d paid for our rooms in advance, and the innkeeper wasn’t around. Slowly, we crept through the darkened streets. It was still a little while before dawn, and there was not a soul to be seen on the streets. Before long, we arrived at the plaza.

Mel was just about to transform and carry us out when it happened.

“Oh, travelers. You are leaving already?”

The voice was beautiful—I felt like my heart skipped a beat just hearing it. Before I could think better of it, I turned around to see who had spoken.

A woman was standing there. She had long, dark, glossy hair, and her eyes were a deep purple. Her dress matched her hair, and it wrapped around her, showing off a figure that seemed almost otherworldly. For a brief instant, I thought I was looking at the Priestess of the Moon that I knew so well.

Behind this woman...were several hundred knights in dark armor.

She was obviously of high status. Of course, I didn’t have to guess who she was—I already knew.

Still, I decided to ask for the benefit of my other party members. “And who would you be?”

I expected her not to answer, but she did so openly.

“I am Nevia, the ruler of Laphroaig. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” She smiled elegantly.

Queen Nevia of Laphroaig—otherwise known as the Witch of Calamity. She was known as a traitor to the people of the western continent and was

also the Priestess of the Moon in this era.

“Elementalist, we’re surrounded,” Mel said.

“So it seems.”

More armor-clad knights appeared from the shadows of the buildings around the plaza. They were the Temple Knights of the country...or, that’s what they should’ve been.

Why were they waiting for us? Had the innkeeper spotted us leaving and reported us? Well, the details didn’t matter now—we’d stumbled into a trap.

Suddenly, I worried someone had seen our rendezvous with Ira. I dropped a hand to rest lightly on the necklace I was wearing.

“Iraaaa? Can you hear me?”

Ira’s sleepy voice responded moments later.

“What do you want at this hour? Have you slipped out of the city?”

Huh, she’d been sleeping? She was sure taking it easy. I was glad she was safe.

“We’re currently surrounded by the queen and her subordinates,” I told her.

“What?! Are you okay?! What do you need?!”

“We’ll manage. You take care.”

“W-Wait right there! Are you really—”

I cut off the call.

“So, would you tell me your names?” the queen asked, her eyes glowing gold.

“Momo, don’t look! Mel!”

“Got it!”

I immediately covered Momo’s eyes, and Mel did the same to Abel.

“Mel, are you good?” I asked, frantically glancing over to her.

“Yes...but even I can only barely resist. To think a human is behind this...” A shimmering sheen of sweat coated her face. “Elementalist, you will not be able to resist it as a human of your lev—”

“*Charm* has no effect on me at all,” I interrupted. “I’m fine.”

Mel offered a strained smile. “You are as mysterious as ever.”

“My *Charm* has no effect?” the queen asked, her eyes widening. Those same eyes started glowing brighter.

“Your Majesty, we actually have an urgent engagement,” I said. “Please, allow us to leave the city despite the early hour.”

I doubted she would let us go, but it was still worth a shot.

“You can look me in the eye and still disobey...” she murmured. “Truly, you are intriguing. I would very much enjoy a conversation with you. I will prepare tea and snacks.”

At that, the knights all rushed toward us.

“Mel! Let’s move!”

“Got it! Buy me ten seconds!”

“Roger!”

That short conversation was all we could manage.

Time Magic: Mind Accel.

I sped up my thoughts.

“Wh-Wha?” stammered Momo.

“Um?!” Abel exclaimed. “What’s going on?!”

“You two, stay calm.”

Momo and Abel were panicking and confused, with their eyes still covered. There wasn’t any time to explain, though.

“Dia!”

“Yes, my liege?”

Even as I summoned her, the knights were drawing closer.

“Water Magic: Mist!”

As my yell echoed through the plaza, we were engulfed in a mist that cut down visibility to less than half a meter. My *Night Vision* skill let me peer through the spell, and I tracked the knights’ confused movements as they came to a stop.

Three seconds.

Suddenly, I heard a command in Elemanti.

“××××××××. (Blow it away, wind elementals.)”

Within an instant, the mist had vanished. I peered around for the caster and soon spotted one of the knights wearing the most eye-catching black armor.

Geh! Cain!

Noah’s disciple was here! We were in trouble...

“Water Magic: Squall!”

The next spell I cast made it start pouring—it was as if a huge bucket of water was being upturned. The knights stirred in confusion, but Cain came charging straight at us.

I glanced at the queen—she looked back calmly. Her body was wreathed in fire, and the rain wasn't touching her. *Probably barrier magic of some kind.*

Six seconds.

“Die, heretic!”

Cain raised his sword to cut us through, but then, the queen spoke.

“Come now, don't kill them, Cain. Then I can't talk with him.”

“Hm.”

He halted, hesitating. Lucky us—this gave us time to have Dia start on the defensive.

“Water Magic: Storm.”

My third spell summoned a peal of thunder, and dozens of bolts of lightning struck around the outside of the city. That made the queen's expression change.

“No! Check that none of the citizens' homes have been damaged!” she ordered immediately.

Cain stopped dead.

Ten seconds.

“We're going!” shouted Mel, who had returned to her dragon form.

Momo and Abel, still with their eyes closed, clung to her back. *Crap, I'm gonna be left behind!* I only had time to think that before my hand was gripped in her huge claw. *Thanks, Mel!*

“Tch!”

Cain slashed at me again.

“Dia!”

“Suuuuure.”

That easygoing response was accompanied by a few dozen ice barriers, which appeared in front of Cain. Of course, the relic he wielded ripped through them, but it was enough to buy us time.

“Queen Nevia!” I called just before Mel flew off. “All of the lightning was outside the city!”

For a split second, I thought she looked thankful.

We were up in the air in an instant, and the town grew smaller behind us. Mel flew on at an incredible speed, leaving Cornet far behind us.

“We made it...and it seems we were not followed,” Mel remarked with a

sigh. She'd transferred me up to her back.

"What's going on?" Momo asked uneasily. "That was...*Cain* with her, wasn't it?" Momo might have had her eyes closed, but the queen had called him by name.

Abel spoke next, and his voice was shaking. But it was anger that flooded his words, not fear or unease. "Why... Why was the queen with him...? I-It...doesn't make sense..."

I'd been surprised to see Cain there as well. Was Laphroaig his base? If so, it'd be a good idea to stay far away.

"*Ira,*" I said through the necklace, "*we got away. Are you still safe?*"

"*Yes, I'm fine. Please, don't worry me like that.*"

"*We just met Cain. Did you know he was in the country?*"

"*What?! N-No way!*"

Apparently not—she would've told us if she'd known. But Cain was just as devout to Noah as I was, so she probably couldn't see his future.

"*I'll leave the city soon too,*" she said.

"*Please do.*"

It'd be no laughing matter if Estelle was killed...

We spent a whole day flying. We soared across the borders of Laphroaig, and eventually, we spotted the mountain range at the edge of the continent.

At the center of those mountains was Arcareus Sanctus.

Apparently, the temple itself was concealed by barrier magic, which kept it hidden from sight. But Ira had told us how to find it.

"There are seven peaks in a row—only by visiting them in a specific order can you reach the temple. It is an inconvenient barrier, but that is what makes it safe," I heard Mel mumble.

And indeed, she proceeded to trace a strange, specific path through the air. All at once, the scenery changed. A spring that looked almost like an oasis flowed across the mountain's summit, surrounded by greenery.

Standing inconspicuously near it was the temple.

We had reached the hidden holy ground—The Temple of the Sun.

Chapter 8: Makoto Takatsuki Speaks with a Demon Lord

It'd been three days since we'd arrived at the temple. There was a spring nearby, so water wasn't a problem. And since various fruits and vegetables—including wheat—were growing all around, we didn't need to worry about food either.

It seemed like these resources were maintained by magic, and the lack of monsters made the temple seem really peaceful.

"Is this paradise?" murmured Abel—or rather, Anna, since she was in her female form. She'd been spending a lot of time as Anna lately.

I took a sip of the spring water. *Delicious*. "It's more than pleasant," I remarked, staring at the flowing water. *Do mountain tops have springs? Maybe they do in this world*. I gave up thinking about it.

We were sitting around a stone dining table that Mel had made using ground magic. Before us was a spread of bread, fruit, and some meat. Mel had made the bread by using some sort of cooking magic. *She really can do anything*. We'd gotten the meat by hunting farther down the mountain—Momo and Anna had roasted it for us.

As for me...I'd peeled fruit with a knife.

"Um...Sir Makoto?" Momo asked, fidgeting.

"Right, you want your usual."

I held out my arm, and Momo latched on.

She let out a happy sigh. "Your blood is so sweet..."

"Sweet? Really?"

She let me go after a while, and out of curiosity, I licked the wound she'd left behind. It was saltier than it was sweet. Frankly, it just tasted like blood. I didn't understand vampire taste buds.

"U-Um...Sir Makoto, my mouth was just there!" Her face had gone red.

"Hm?"

Oh, right, she'd just bitten there. Guess me licking it was...an indirect

kiss?

Anna shot me a light glare. “Makoto...you’re so shameless.”



Hey... All I did was lick my own blood.

“So, what are our plans now?” Mel asked.

I nodded, ready to get back on track. “Okay, Momo, you follow Mel’s training plan. Anna, could you talk with Althena, please? Also, we’re above the clouds here, so your *Hero of Light* skill should work—work on training that.”

“Sunlight makes things harder for me...” Momo muttered sadly.

We were covered by the temple’s roof right now, but if Momo stood directly in the sun, she’d collapse. I stroked her hair. This was a difficult environment for a vampire, but it was definitely safer than below, so she’d need to bear with it for now.

“I’m praying every day,” Anna said, her voice lacking any energy, “but I can’t hear her at all.”

Hmm. I knew Althena’s influence was weaker without faith, but to think, not even her priestess could talk to her...

“I’m heading down to Labyrinthos,” I said. “I need to explain our plans to Johnnie. Also, I need to hand over the weapons Estelle gave us for the townspeople. Mel, do you mind acting as transport?”

“You’re almost taking advantage of my skills as a dragon. Still, I am curious to see how my family is. Very well.”

In the end, she agreed to the trip without much issue.

“Makoto...” Anna said softly. “Be careful.”

“I’ll miss you, Teacher!” exclaimed Momo.

“I’ll be back in a few days,” I assured them with a laugh.

With that, Mel and I departed for Labyrinthos. The journey went smoothly, and along the way, we came across quite a few groups of monsters. I used my dagger to sacrifice them to Eir.

Getting my life span back! Getting it back!

The monsters in this era were strong, so I was about to efficiently collect a hundred years of life span. Mel gave me a wary look as I hummed while looking through my Soul Book.

“What’s up?” I asked her.

“Your enjoyment of the sacrificial techniques is quite unnerving.”

“It...is?” *Uh-oh. Don’t wanna frighten her. I’ll have to be careful to not overdo it.*

We arrived at the entrance to Labyrinthos after two days of travel, and

once inside, we teleported down to the middle layer.

The sight that met our eyes was shocking, to say the least.

“I-It’s...”

“Well, this is quite the town,” Mel said in awe.

The settlement wasn’t huge, but instead of making homes out of gloomy nooks in crags of the cave, the shores of the lake were lined with buildings. *Wouldn’t those get attacked by monsters?*

A red-haired youth spotted Mel and began running over. “Mother! You’re back!” But when he saw me, he backed off. “Y-You!”

“Uh...who’re you?” I asked. He apparently knew me, but I didn’t recognize him at all.

“That’s the red dragon you first froze,” said Mel. “Have you forgotten?”

“Oooh.” I turned to the redhead. “Uh, yeah, it’s been a while.”

“Guh! I’ll beat you at some point! Not now, though! I can’t yet!” His voice was insistent, but he was also moving farther and farther away.

I let out a sigh. *Must’ve frightened him. I feel bad.* Apparently, having an ancient dragon constantly lurking around had kept the monsters away.

All I could do was head for Johnnie’s place. As I was looking around for someone who could point me in the right direction, I heard a woman’s gasp accompanied by the sound of rushing footsteps. Someone was headed our way.

“Makoto! Huh? Where are Momo and Abel? D-Don’t tell me they...”

It was Julietta.

“Oh, hi,” I said. “Don’t worry—they’re safe and getting some training done. Is Johnnie around, by the way?”

“Hmm, he left to go hunting, but I’m pretty sure he’ll be back soon.”

“I see.”

So he wasn’t here at the moment. While waiting, I said hello to Volf and Deckel. They were curious about what had happened in Cornet, so I filled them in. Apparently, my story came as a shocking revelation.

“The Demon Lord Cain was in Laphroaig?”

“And the citizens are stuck under a charm...”

Johnnie returned after a while. I greeted him, and for some reason, Johnnie declared that the town would have a feast to celebrate our return.

“Julietta,” I whispered. “How come he’s organizing a feast?”

“Well, you’re the first one to actually make it back from Laphroaig.”

Ah, well that made some sense. Thanks to Mel, the journey itself had been pretty uneventful, so returning didn't feel like a huge accomplishment.

Johnnie had named me as the guest of honor, so I'd been seated beside him at the head of the table. During dinner, I took the time to explain our plans for the future.

"Ira's advice was to train for about a year to fight the demon lord, which sounds like a good idea," I explained. "I'm sorry, but would you be willing to wait?"

The handsome elf's brow furrowed at my question. U-Uh? Was he *not* happy to wait?

"You went to search for a holy sword...but instead met the Priestess of Fate and clashed once again with Cain? And now they're training in the hidden temple at Ascareus Sanctus. What in the world, Sir Makoto?"

I shuddered out a relieved sigh. At least he didn't seem angry. This also seemed like the right time to hand over Ira's equipment.

I handed Johnnie a katana and a bow. "Ira thought these would be perfect for you, so please go ahead and use them."

"What are these?"

"I got them from Lady Estelle's hideout. She had a whole stockpile of rare weapons."

Of course, I didn't really know the differences between any of them. I could at least tell that they were magical. Johnnie stared at the weapons in his hands.

"These do not seem like weapons produced on this continent. They must be from another."

"Right—they're apparently from the eastern continent."

I guess, once you were as skilled as Johnnie, you could spot the differences as clear as day.

"And they aren't replicas," he murmured. "These are originals, created by a craftsman. They take me back..."

"Are you from the eastern continent?" I asked.

In the future, there weren't any records of Johnnie's origins. We only knew that he was older than Hero Abel and the Grandsage.

"No. I have never left this continent. I have wished to visit the others before, but... Well, we can discuss that at another time. I understand what you have to say, and I do not mind if it takes us some time to defeat the

demon lord. I will wait until you are ready.”

“I’ll let you know when we are.”

He nodded. “Indeed.”

Well, that was sorted. Afterward, he asked me plenty about Laphroaig.

Some of Mel’s family eventually came up from the depths of Labyrinthos to join the feast. And of course...not one of the monsters native to *this* layer showed hide nor hair of itself.

◇ The Next Day ◇

“Shall we head back, then?” I asked Mel.

“Indeed. Abel and my little apprentice are waiting.”

I quickly climbed up on Mel, and we set off for the temple. The journey started off well, just like the trip to Labyrinthos.

But then...

Cain appeared, riding on the back of a blight dragon. The man, clad in pitch-black armor, leveled his greatsword at me.

“You!” he boomed. “You are separated from the hero. Spit out where he’s hiding!”

Noah’s mad disciple...

This was the third time we’d met. The first time had been at the entrance to Labyrinthos, and I’d been frantic to simply survive. The second time had been in the capital of Laphroaig, and we’d run for it.

And now, this time...

Only Mel and I are here. Normally running away would be our best bet. Yet something Noah had once told me swam to the surface of my mind: “I should tell you about this, but I don’t recommend it...”

If Mel weren’t here, then Cain and I could speak alone, one-on-one. If there was a chance to get him on our side, this was probably it, wasn’t it?

“Elementalist, buy some time. I will fly as fast as—”

“Mel, I’ll stay back as a decoy. You head back to the temple and get Abel.”

“What?! Are you planning on sacrifice—”

“Nope,” I answered. Despite the initial look of shock on her face, one look at my resolve had apparently changed her mind.

“You’re plotting something, aren’t you?”

“I am, yeah.”

“Don’t go too far... I’ll be back in around half a day.”

Normally, the distance to the temple should have taken a whole day. She would be rushing for my sake.

“That’s enough,” I said to Cain as I leaped from Mel’s back. Luckily, the cloak I’d gotten from Ira allowed me to float in the air.

As we separated, Cain glanced between the two of us. He must have been trying to decide which of us to chase. Eventually, he picked me and slowly began to approach.

“Can we cope, Dia?”

“Of course, my liege,” she replied, appearing at my side.

“Abandoning your dragon, huh? You must be eager for death!” he yelled, laughing scornfully. The black-armored demon lord slashed at me, but I threw up a barrier of ice and cast some magic to obscure his vision.

“Water Magic: Blizzard.”

I could hover with the cloak, but my flight speed wasn’t exactly fast. Far from it—I’d lose a race in seconds.

“Phwa ha ha ha! Pointless!”

I ignored his yelling and just pointing at him, muttering.

“Water Magic: Ice Mass.”

A few dozen blocks of ice appeared and hurtled toward Cain.

“You pesky insect!” His sword sheared through them like butter, but several chunks of ice hit. It didn’t matter—his armor repelled any damage. Still, the impacts seemed to irritate him.

“××××××,××××××,××××××! (Fire elementals, wind elementals, blast it away!)” he shouted in Elemanti. Instantly, I felt heat surrounding me.

“Ha ha ha ha ha! Your magic is noth—”

His laughter cut off as the massive dragon of fire he’d summoned vanished like a snuffed-out candle.

There was silence. His helm obscured his face, but I could tell he was taken aback. He rushed toward me again, but I managed to defend using the raging blizzard and blocks of ice.

“Do you not see the futility of your struggle?!” he yelled, slicing through the ice over and over. A second later, another mass of ice struck him, and he screamed in Elemanti once again. “××××××××××,××××××××! (Fire elementals, wind elementals!)”

I braced for the next attack, but...nothing happened.

Uh? I couldn't *not* comment.

"Performance issues?"

Dia murmured in agreement.

"D-Don't look!" he yelled.

Still Dia and I turned out to be right—Cain was awful at utilizing the elementals.

◇ Several Days Ago ◇

In a corner of the temple—quietly, so Abel didn't hear—I was speaking in Elemanti.

"So, Dia, what'll happen if we encounter Cain again? Can you fight him even though he's Noah's believer?"

This had been worrying me, so I wanted to clear things up. After all, Noah was sort of the elementals' boss—could they stand against Noah's believer in this time period?

"Hmph, I wondered what you were going to ask. But this question is nonsense, my liege." She giggled at my concern.

"It is?"

"Indeed. The elementals hate rough men like Cain."

"Rough?"

"Right. His use of the language, of spells, and of us in general—all of it is crude at best. The elementals don't like that."

"They...don't?"

Unlike me, Cain seemed to be able to control more than just water elementals. Yet, according to Dia, he couldn't do it all that well.

"The elementals like kind and caring people," she explained. "And Noah also loves freedom. There is no need for us to listen to those we don't like! I serve only those I wish."

"I see." Well, Noah never did bother with the details. Her general stance was to just let people do what they wanted. Apparently, her retainers were the same way.

"So Cain isn't quite *there* as an elemental?" I asked.

"I feel sorry for the elementals following him."

Huh. If an arch elemental of water is saying as much, it must be right.

“And what about me?” I asked.

“My liege, you are...skilled.”

She shot me a meaningful look. *Why're you blushing?*

“Your mere touch makes us quiver in sweet pleas—”

“Wait, wait, wait.”

I didn't touch Dia each and every time I used elemental magic. This wasn't like a porn game or anything...

“It was a metaphor,” she said defensively. “I was just trying to emphasize your level of skill.”

“I suppose that's fine.”

With that, our conversation concluded.



Dia and I continued redirecting Cain's attacks for several hours. My spells didn't do anything, but his weren't even landing. It was a stalemate.

“Tch! There's no end to it! Annoying insect!”

He swung the sword again. The black blade came toward me, but an ice barrier soon deflected it.

A clumsy attack—he was losing concentration.

Is it almost time? His attacks had weakened, and so, too, had his motivation. Soon enough, his impatience would force him to give up and leave. If I was going to talk with him, now was the time.

I stopped the blizzard, along with the bombardment of ice.

“Finally run out of mana?” he asked.

Not quite.

I snapped my fingers.

“*Water Magic: Ice Mass.*”

Huge hunks of ice appeared all around us.

He glared at them. “Tch!”

He should know that elementalists don't run out of mana.

“I want to talk to you,” I said.

“Begging for your life? If you tell me where the hero is, then I can let you—”

I cut him off.

“Cainhart Weelach.”

He twitched. “Why... H-How do you know that name?”

Got him. I didn’t answer. I just grinned.

Cainhart Weelach was the name Noah had given me—his real name. She also told me his story. Cainhart was born on one of the hundreds of islands near the southern continent. His homeland was a barren place, one where people eked out a sparse existence in hiding thanks to countless demon attacks. And since they had only few resources, the people also constantly fought each other.

Cainhart was a child from a community on one of those islands. Eventually, Cainhart’s people lost against those from another island. All of them were poor, and such things were not uncommon. Normally, the losers would all be killed, but Cainhart was weak and—unfortunately—rather attractive. Though he was male, he was still young and virile, and the other island’s leader took a liking to him. Cain was allowed to live as a “kept man.”

Thus, he was cast into the hell of being used for the pleasure of his family’s killers.

Cainhart’s island had faith in a deity, but he cursed the god for not saving him. He would have sold his soul to the Daemons if it meant exacting revenge on those who had taken his family. Each night, he pleaded for some divinity to answer him. Then, one day, he was addressed by an old goddess, one trapped in the Seafloor Temple—Noah.

She does well with loners... This felt a bit too similar to how things had gone down with me.

Either way, he met her in his dreams and swore to follow her. And when he awoke, there were relics on his pillow.

That was similar to my experience as well. She’d encouraged him in the same way.

He now had armor that could defend against all attacks and a sword that could cut through everything. Noah had birthed a berserker.

Using the relics, Cainhart got his revenge. He destroyed his family’s foes and offered his goddess gratitude, swearing to do anything for her. However, she had told him, “Just do what you want.” Therefore, Cainhart decided to gather followers for his goddess.

He left his home, crossing to the mainland. The continent was ruled by demons, and equipped with the relics as he was, there was no one with the

strength to become his enemy. At first, he had aided persecuted humans, but none of them had been willing to follow the goddess Noah. He had no comrades.

Then, the demon lord who ruled the continent appeared. He took an interest in Cainhart. He also knew that the man did not believe in the Sacred Deities. So, the demon lord offered Cainhart an incentive.

He told Cainhart of how Noah was one of the gods who'd lost Titanomachia and explained how they shared a common enemy. The demon lord suggested they rule together. Cainhart accepted. His beloved goddess offered her support as well.

And that was the birth of Demon Lord Cain.

This had all happened several years ago.



And now...

"How...do you know my name?" he asked again, clearly confused.

I had only one answer.

"Noah told me."

He twitched again.

"Trying to trick me?" he spat. "Only I... Only her *believer* can hear her. You could not have spoken to my goddess."

His voice was hard. It sounded like he was never going to believe me.

"Let's talk about it, then," I replied. I kept my smile as I recited what I knew of his past—the story of an unfortunate island boy and how that boy had eventually become a demon lord.

Cain's response was instantaneous. He practically convulsed with shock, almost dropping his sword.

Cainhart had not discussed his past with anyone. Anyone but his goddess, that is.

"How do you know...about my past? Are you telling the truth? B-But that's impossible..."

"As I said, Noah told me. I wanted to talk with you, Cainhart."

Noah called him by his real name, so I figured I should do the same while trying to reason with him. That's what she'd advised me. But when Cain had attacked us in Labyrinthos, Abel had been there, so I couldn't

have spoken to him like this.

“Are you...on my side? Prove it!” Cain demanded.

“Hmm...”

Proving it would be difficult. I unsheathed my dagger, showing him the blade.

“Noah gave me this dagger. It’s made of the same material as your relics. Well, not that I can prove where it came from.”

“This dagger... I can feel the same anima in my sword. But...”

“My liege, you know you don’t *need* his help?” Dia said from my side, twining her fingers through her hair. “We are more than enough.”

That might’ve been true, but fighting Cain was using up my life span, so I didn’t want to keep it up. I asked her to look as relaxed as possible.

Cain leveled me with a stare. “What...is your goal here? Why are you on the hero’s side?”

I snorted at his question. It was a silly one.

“Because Noah wants me to be.”

“She wants you...to save heroes? That can’t be right. She praises me every time I slaughter one!”

Oh, right—she let him kill heroes in this era.

“However many of them you kill, it won’t actually help her. If anything, it causes her to get treated as a wicked deity in the future. She’ll suffer for it, even after a thousand years have passed.”

“What...the...?” He shook his head, seeming not to believe me.

“It’s true,” I insisted. “Your actions paint her in a negative light.”

“You think you can trick me?!” Cain roared angrily. “I’ll cut you down if you open your mouth again!”

Guess he finally lost his chill. Dia was ready to defend me, but I held up my hand to stop her.

Cain wanted more believers for Noah. However, the divine edict meant she could gain no more than one. Still, he kept trying, never gaining more comrades, feeling lonely. He had no one, even after becoming a demon lord. He was feared, though not respected. Cain was the only believer of Noah in this world...until now.

I spoke the words Cain needed to hear.

“Noah’ll be sad if her only two believers are fighting, wouldn’t you say?”

He jolted, letting his sword drop limp.

“You’re...her believer?”

“That’s right. The same as you.”

“I...see. I’ve never met another before.”

He slowly slipped his helmet off. Underneath the helm was a face so attractive that it could have belonged to a woman. Of course, his beauty had been a burden, so complimenting him wasn’t the best idea.

“What’s your name?” he murmured.

I hesitated for a beat and then said, “Makoto Takatsuki.”

Cain would probably talk about me with Noah later, so giving my actual name was probably the best idea. Noah couldn’t see far into the future though, so I didn’t know if any of this would work in my favor.

“Makoto Takatsuki.” He stared at me, eyes hard. “If killing heroes will not help her, what should I do?”

I thought for a moment.

“What about going to rescue her from the Seafloor Temple?”

Cain’s eyes narrowed. “Her prison? I do not know where it is, so I cannot even attempt it.”

He...doesn’t know? I hadn’t expected that answer.

“Well, I know where it is,” I told him. I’d even been there before.

“What?!” he exclaimed.

“Haven’t you asked Noah?”

“She wouldn’t tell me. She said I wouldn’t make it there.”

Yeah, that made sense—I recalled her being pretty negative about my chances of beating it too.

“Iblis promised that if I killed all the heroes, he would assist. But however many I kill, more appear. There’s no end to them. Eventually...”

“Oh, so *that’s* what he promised.” When a hero was killed, their goddess would just assign the role to a new person, so it would probably *never* end. Still, I could use that, along with the fact that Cain didn’t know where the temple was.

“Makoto Takatsuki!” His expression was hard and serious. “Tell me where the Seafloor Temple is. If you do, then I shall trust you.”

Right where I want you. I grinned back.

“Tell you? That’s all you want?”

“What?” He frowned, visibly confused once again.

“How about I go with you? We can attempt it together.”

“What...the...?” His eyes went wide. My answer was apparently not what he’d expected.

“We both believe in Noah, so our goals are the same, right?”

“But...”

“Think about it—your relics plus my elemental magic. Maybe we can use them together to bust her out.”

He gasped.

“There’s a lot to prepare,” I continued, “so let’s plan to attempt it seven days from now. We can meet here.”

“S-Seven days?! So soon?!”

“The sooner the better, right?” I grinned wider. “Can you use *Water Breathing*? We’ll be underwater for about half a day. Also, I assume you can swim in that armor.”

“M-More or less...”

The way he said that didn’t fill me with confidence.

“The divine beast Leviathan protects the temple,” I said. “We should start with scouting things out. Any questions?”

He shot me a doubtful glare. “Are you serious?”

“I’ll be going on my own either way. Don’t you want to save her?”

“You’d go alone?”

“Yup. I’ve actually been before.”

Silence stretched between us for a few moments.

“Very well,” he said. “I shall join you.”

“It’s settled, then.” I smiled, holding out my right hand. Cain didn’t look quite happy.

Are you serious? I heard in my head.

Ira? You were listening?

You’re trying to get a demon lord on your side while being Abel’s ally?

Surely it’s better than staying enemies? After all, as long as he has those relics, I’m not going to beat him.

You can beat him once Abel knows how to use the Hero of Light skill.

Well...we can, but...

But what?

Well, uh... To tell you the truth, it’s because he’s Noah’s believer. I don’t want him to die if he doesn’t have to.

Right. Ira sighed heavily. Make sure Abel does not find out. He killed their parents, so Abel hates him more than anything.

Right, I'll be careful.

I nodded along to her words as I stared at the man before me. "I look forward to working with you, Cainhart."

"Makoto Takatsuki." His glare grew fiercer. "If you are lying, you will pay with your life."

Ha! He said the funniest things.

"I swear on Noah and my life. We'll beat the Seafloor Temple together."

Cain clasped my hand. That hand, which had killed so many heroes, was beautiful.

Thus, Cain and I agreed to challenge the Seafloor Temple together.



Epilogue: The Girls Meet Up in Laphroaig

◇ Furiae's Perspective ◇

It had been three months since my knight had left on his journey.

“Your Majesty! There are a hundred new citizens in the city!”

“Queen Furiae! The palace will soon be decorated!”

“My Queen! We should strengthen our forces to protect the city!”

Voices called my name constantly. I was in the throne room of Laphroaig's palace, which was currently under construction.

People were constantly moving to the new capital. This was because we were gathering the cambions who had been hiding across the continent.

“Lady Furiae, Princess Sophia will be arriving from Roses tomorrow. Will the usual greeting suffice?”

“Oh, it is almost time,” I remarked.

Roses had lent us much of the manpower we needed to rebuild the country, though they were by no means blessed in that respect—other nations had many more soldiers to spare than Roses did. Highland was the most prosperous, but we could not borrow their strength. Well, more accurately, years of institutional persecution meant that my citizens all hated Highland.

The animosity had all started because the cambions had been part of Iblis's forces a thousand years ago. However, I truly wished that those values had not survived until now.

Roses—under Eir's guidance—was much kinder to the persecuted than Highland. Even the cambions had found Roses to be the easiest place to live.

“She goes out of her way to take the long journey here, even though her own country is struggling... I honestly cannot find fault in Her Highness.”

“Indeed,” I remarked. “Prepare a force to meet her. We do not want to go

to extremes though, so take care.”

“Of course! Leave it to me, Lady Furiae.”

My aide gave an energetic answer before rushing away. The citizens liked the princess as well, so just leaving it to my subordinates would be fine.

“Lady Furiae! There is a troubling report!”

I gave a pained sigh. *It's just one problem after another.* “What is it?”

“There are undead being reported in the city night after night.”

“Undead?” I asked. “That’s strange.” I put a hand to my chin in contemplation.

The undead usually only appeared around old settlements. When people lived in an area for long enough, the dead—perhaps deceased citizens—could rise from their graves. The capital was a new city though, so undead would normally not be a concern.

“A necromancer could be behind it,” someone suggested.

“Why, though?” I asked. “Have there been any casualties?”

“None! Our citizens are all accomplished mages! The undead are no match!”

“I see...though the safety of our children is a concern.”

“Indeed... We wish to solve this issue, but we do not have enough people to spare. Perhaps we could discuss it with Princess Sophia when she arrives?”

That certainly was logical—she was a priestess of the goddess’s church and had many clergy that could exorcise the undead. Laphroaig, on the other hand, didn’t have enough people capable of that.

“I would rather not bother her with mere undead,” I stated. “Perhaps I could head out myself to find the source? I *am* rather skilled with *Necroman*—”

“You must not, my queen!” came the simultaneous call from all of my subordinates.

What was all that about? Queens had no freedom...

We ended up deciding to discuss the matter of the undead with the adventurer’s guild.

◇ That Night ◇

Heh heh heh...it's been so long since I wandered the streets alone. Now that I think about it, the last time was when I was on the run in Highland.

Currently, I was walking through the capital on my own. It was late, and the night was dark. The city had only just been completed, so there were few places open at this hour, so the light level was much lower than in most cities.

Energy was mainly clustered around the few taverns. People spilled out from the inside, making merry on the streets. We also had a good number of patrolling mages to keep public order.

The city still has a long way to go. That was the main reason I wanted to deal with the undead quickly. It was also why I'd decided to sneak out of the palace. This excursion was, of course, a secret from my subordinates.

Thinking back, my knight was constantly doing this sort of thing... He'd bring up his *Stealth* skill at the drop of a hat to sneak off somewhere.

I couldn't use that skill though, so instead, I was wearing a dark, hooded robe that helped me blend in with the night. *Maybe that just makes me seem more suspicious, though...*

Just then, one of the patrolling mages called out to me. "You there! It isn't safe for a woman to be walking around at this time of night!"

Well, this is an issue. I didn't reply, and he drew closer.

"Why are you hiding your face?" he demanded. "You belong here, do you not? Show me!"

I pulled my hood back, revealing my face.

"This should suffice, no?"

His face twisted in shock. "You... I mean, My Lady!"

"I apologize, but I have business. Could you let me pass?"

Charm Eyes.

"O-Of course," he replied after a pause. "As you command."

Charm had handily manipulated him. I felt bad, but I couldn't head back to the palace yet.

I kept walking, and eventually, I arrived at an empty area. I saw no undead lurking around. *Well, the reports did mention that they don't appear every night.* There was a chance they wouldn't show up.

But...

Fate Magic: Future Sight.

This was a spell I used to struggle with a lot in the past. But now that I

was a saint, I found it much easier.

They'll be here...

Future Sight told me that the undead would indeed be present tonight. I was skilled at necromancy, so they would be easy to deal with. However, killing them (again) wouldn't solve the source of the problem.

I'll find whoever thinks they can mess with our city.

After all, I had gone on adventures with Lucy and Aya, so I was experienced in matters like this. *It should be an easy problem to solve!*

I just had to wait until they arrived.

"Hm? Why is a human here?"

"Were you followed?"

"No human could ever manage to follow me!"

"No matter. We can kill her. She'll make a good undead."

Two suspicious individuals had arrived. Judging from their conversation, they were the source of the undead plaguing our city. All I had to do now was report it to our court mages—these men could then be captured and tried quickly.

Now, how do I get out of this situation?

"Bad luck, missy. Your fault for wandering around at night."

One of the men was grinning as he approached. With green skin and red eyes, he was clearly neither a human nor a cambion. This was a demon. The other person standing with their arms folded a little ways away was a demon as well. I'd been expecting some of the Snake Sect or Iblis's believers—I hadn't thought we had been infiltrated by actual demons.

Still, I wasn't just going to let them get away with it.

The demon kept on grinning. "Well then...feel free to resist, if you can."

"Don't make noise," said the other demon. "You'll reveal our strategy."

"Hmph, she's just a mewling woman. It'll be over soon—"

That was when I dropped my hood and activated *Charm*.

"Obey me!"

I had no offensive magic, so to protect myself, I either had to use *Charm* on my opponents or use necromancy to create allies. I didn't have the time for the latter, so I used the former.

"Guh!"

"*Charm*... And her face..."

“Wha?”

I reeled. It should’ve worked immediately—I would have known—but this wasn’t what I’d expected.

“Shame...” said the demon with mock pity. “It’s pointless. That doesn’t work on us.”

Normally, *Charm* allowed me to control people in an instant. These two demons still had their faculties, though.

“My...*Charm*...isn’t working?”

Many demons had strong magic resistance. However, I had only ever encountered one other demon who was this strong against my skill—Sciulli, the demon woman who had attacked us in the Forest of Fiends.

Which means...

“You are demons from a millennium ago...”

“Hmph.” The demon scoffed. “We have held audience...with Lady Nevia...”

“You have nothing on that witch... Though you look...awfully similar.”

I slowly backed away. If *Charm* wasn’t working, then all I could do was run. But demons were beyond humans in their abilities. Whether I’d be *able* to run was still to be seen.

“Hmph, think you’re getting away?”

“You need to die.”

“Guh!” I gasped.

This was bad. At this point, I’d have to abandon my shame and try and cause a commotion so someone found me.

“Hiyaaahh!”

Suddenly, there was a massive thumping noise, like a falling boulder. It was followed by a strangled cry. I did a double take and saw that the green demon had been blasted away by a kick from a small girl—a familiar girl with her hair tied up in pigtails.

Then, a magic circle appeared nearby, and someone else stepped out of it.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Fuuri! You good?”

In front of me stood a girl wearing a bright red cloak—her long hair flowed freely in the night air. She must have teleported in.

“Aya...Lucy?”

They were here—the two girls I’d once adventured alongside.

“Fuu! Thank goodness.” The girl who had kicked the demon engulfed me in a hug.

“Wh-Why are you here?” I asked.

“Sophie told us you were in trouble.”

“Princess Sophia?” How did she know? As far as I knew, she didn’t have *Future Sight*.

Meanwhile, the two demons glared hatefully at Lucy and Aya. After recovering from the sudden attack, they stood unflinching.

“You’ve done it now,” spat one of the demons. “None of you are getting away.”

“You might have succeeded at a surprise attack, but the two of you are just female adventurers. You are no match for us.”

Lucy barked a laugh. “That’s rich coming from two demons who can’t even take on a fledgling country properly. You’re just sneaking in undead.”

“Yeah, lame ain’t it, Lu?”

Indeed, they had succeeded in provoking the demons. *Actually, is this the best idea?*

“Foolish...Humans...”

“You Will Regret Your Hubris...”

Their bodies started to warp and twist. That wasn’t all—their voices had grown harsher and crueler. Apparently, they were taking this fight seriously.

“Be careful, both of you!” I shouted.

They turned back to smile at me.

“Well, we can’t make Fuu worry,” Aya remarked. “*Superstar!*” Her body started to glow in a prismatic rainbow of light.

“You’re right. Let’s finish this in one shot—*Dress of Spirit!*”

Lucy’s body flared with burning red light. *Wait, that’s the same as Rosalie...*

The two demons backed away slightly, realizing that they weren’t ordinary girls. Still, they remained, intending to fight.

“Wh-What...?” sputtered one of the demons.

“Empty Threats at Best...” growled the other.

The girls didn’t waste another second.

“Hrah!”

“Go away!”

Aya’s body disappeared in a flash—Lucy launched her from a *Teleport*

into a tackle.

It was done in a single hit, just as they'd promised.

◇ The Next Day ◇

“Your Majesty, are you aware of your position?”

The question was spoken in an icy voice.

We were in my private room. Despite that, I was the one on my knees. Looking down at me was Roses's princess—Sophia.

“But I was just going for a short walk.”

“And you did so *outside*! Without any escort! What were you thinking?! You are the *queen* of this country!”

“Right...I'm sorry.” I slumped over.



I really would have been in trouble if Lucy and Aya hadn't shown up.

"If something were to happen to you, Laphroaig would fall! You have no line of succession, so—"

"O-Of course I don't!"

A line of succession meant *children*. I wasn't even married, so of course I didn't have one.

"There are countless nobles that want to marry you."

"N-No way! I won't take anyone but my knight— Oh..." I slapped a hand over my mouth, trying to conceal my slipup.

The man that was my guardian knight—Makoto Takatsuki—was both the State-Authorized Hero of Roses and the water priestess Sophia's fiancé.

She let out a sigh. "Well, I do know how taken you are with him...but Laphroaig will not claim him."

"I know..."

Things felt rather awkward. *Damn it! This is all his fault.* I'd love to complain to my knight, but he was off gallivanting in the past, so he wasn't here...

"Come on, Sophia. That's enough, don't you think?"

"Right, it's been so long since we were all together."

Fortunately, Lucy and Aya cleared the awkward atmosphere. The two of them had been in the room the whole time, but they'd just silently watched the lambasting.

And with smiles on their faces!

"I suppose so..." murmured the princess.

"Thank goodness! The lecture is over!"

"Let's eat."

"We got things ready."

While I'd been getting reamed out, Aya and Lucy had filled a table with food and drinks. The dishes had been prepared by the palace chefs, while the alcohol was something they'd bought elsewhere.

"Haaah." I stretched my sore muscles. "I'm so tired. And hungry."

"Nrow, nrow."

I looked down and noticed that there was now a cat curled up on my lap. This was my knight's familiar, Twi. The beast must have hidden while I was being lectured. I glared, but Twi just answered with a big stretch. *Cheeky cat.*

“Just like you,” Princess Sophia remarked from my side.

Hm...maybe.

“C’m on, c’m on, you two take a glass too.”

“Cheers!”

Lucy and Aya dragged us all into a party of sorts. After going so long without seeing my friends, the food tasted delicious.

“Honestly! When is he coming back?!”

“I know what you mean...he promised! But he still hasn’t returned.”

“Takatsuki...I’m so lonely...”

The princess, alcohol in hand, sounded much harsher than usual. Lucy was sulking, and Aya was sniffing. None of them were dealing well with the drink, it seemed.

“Nrow, nrow.”

Only the cat was still in a good mood—he was chewing through the roast beef I’d put down. I was so jealous of the familiar’s relaxed nature.

“Your master’s the problem here. Say something,” I flicked the cat lightly on the forehead.

Suddenly, I heard a slight metallic ringing. Like a small bell or something. I glanced around briefly but decided I must have been hearing things. *Maybe I’m just drunk.*

“Hmph. It seems my master has indeed caused some bother.”

None of us had spoken. In fact, the voice was one I’d never heard before. It was a man’s voice, mysterious and beautiful.

The four of us jolted in confusion.

“Who was that?!”

“Where are you?!”

Lucy and Aya were experienced adventurers, and both were instantly ready for a fight. A beat later, the princess and I were warily watching the area to protect ourselves.

But as we scanned the room, we saw no one unfamiliar. It was just the four of us.

“What is so panic-inducing?” said the mysterious voice.

My head snapped down to the source of the voice. *Right here... Right next to me!*

The one who’d spoken...was the cat with my finger on its head.

“That’s...*your* voice,” I said in awe, starting at Twi.

“Indeed so.”

“No way!” Lucy yelled. “Twi’s talking?!”

“Aww, that’s not a cute voice!”

Neither of the other two had known about the cat talking. Obviously, I hadn’t known either.

Princess Sophia was glancing between the cat and me, looking intrigued. “Did your saint’s miracle cause this?”

“Saint’s miracle?”

My voice overlapped with Lucy and Aya’s as we all asked the same question.

“Why do *you* not know?” Princess Sophia sighed.

Well, *excuse me*, Princess. I’d been busy rebuilding a country. And I might be Naya’s priestess, but she hadn’t told me anything.

“It is said that those recognized as saints by Althena gain a miraculous power. Lady Noelle’s is the *Ballad of Victory*, which temporarily increases the mana and stats of allies several times over.”

“Huh, it does?”

“Sophie knows so much.”

Lucy and Aya were hearing this for the first time too. *See, so it makes sense that I didn’t know*. Suddenly, I realized something.

Wait...so that means my miracle...

“So Fuuri’s power is making cats talk?” Lucy asked.

“That’s nice!” Aya exclaimed. “Sounds fun!”

“Wh-What’s the point in that?!” The miracle I got for becoming a saint was...the ability to make cats talk?! Was such a laughable thing even a miracle?!

“That’s not necessarily the—”

Twi cut off Princess Sophia. “Indeed so. Your miracle has granted me speech, Princess. You have my thanks.”

It’s true! The cat itself said as much...very clearly!

“S-So it is...” Damn it all...was this going to be announced around the country? Queen Furiae of Laphroaig’s new miracle was the ability to grant speech to cats. “Th-This is the worst...”

“There, there, do not be so down, Princess,” Twi said soothingly.

“Quit it with the constant ‘Princess’! You’re reminding me of him!” I

couldn't help but yell out angrily.

This cat's master was definitely to blame!

My knight...hurry back. We're all...so lonely.

I hadn't meant to drink so much, but we all ended up partying the night away. It felt like I'd gone back to my adventuring days, and that soothed my heart.



Incidentally, it transpired that my miracle was not the ability to grant speech to cats, but rather, the incredible possibility of “awakening things to their latent potential.” The reason Twi spoke was that all magical beasts gained the ability to use human language as they got stronger.

I was just glad it wasn't a laughable skill.

Thanks to my ability, our personnel shortage would become less of an issue, and the country's development would progress even faster. Even so, it would be slow going.

My knight...when will you return? My clumsy *Future Sight* didn't tell me anything, so all I could do was pray. I normally didn't, and I wasn't even sure she heard me. Still, I prayed, not expecting a response.

Naya...please, save my knight.

For the barest of instants, I thought I heard giggling.

“Naya?” I said aloud. There was no response. Perhaps I had imagined it.

It could have been fatigue. I stretched widely.

There was no one else in my room. Princess Sophia had returned to Roses, and the other two had left to go see the guild. The queen's rooms were some of the biggest in the palace, and it felt lonely with only me to fill them.

Maybe I could put up a portrait of my knight. He wasn't around to sit for one, though.

I tried to think of a solution and then remembered his merchant friend from Roses. *Excellent! I'll ask him about acquiring pictures of my knight.*

Until he returned, I'd settle for those.

Afterword

This is Isle Osaki. Thank you for reading volume ten of *Zero Believers*.

We've started the millennium arc now, so outside of the protagonist and a certain goddess, all the characters are new. How did you like it? The cover character is actually a relatively early one, having appeared since volume two.

I actually thought up this arc when I was creating the story for volume two and decided on the plot when Makoto and the Grandsage were talking. This is one of the climaxes of the story, so I'm exceptionally grateful that we've been able to continue publication. The arc is also rather long, and it's the first one that is split. This tenth volume is basically the "gathering" part. Next time, we'll start fighting the demon lords! This is how Demon Lord Cain ended up in his position as well...

Lastly, it's time for my special thanks. Momo's character design is amazing, Tam-U! The manga version of Labyrinthos was great too, Hakuto Shiroy! Finally, S, I need to apologize for how late my submission was.

And, to all of my readers, thank you once again. I hope you will continue to enjoy *Zero Believers* in the future.

Bonus Short Stories

Cooking Lessons in Another World

“So...” Mel glanced between the three of us. “There is food in the temple, but who can cook well?”

“I can at least heat things up,” said Momo.

“If I’ve got instructions, I can cope...” Anna answered with an apologetic expression.

I shrugged. “Usually, I just eat what I can get.”

Mel let out a big sigh. “Fine. I will make something. The food we bought in Cornet was delicious, though...”

Ah, well, she lived underground for so long, so I guess it makes sense that she’s still thinking about all the different dishes she got to sample in Laphroaig. Mel is always looking after us, so I want to pay her back somehow... I glanced around the fields and saw all sorts of crops growing. There’s so much variety in the food back on Earth. Perhaps, as an otherworlder, I can offer her something you don’t usually find in this world.

“Huh? Those are...”

There—I’d found several ingredients that were familiar to me.



“Elementalist, are you sure this will taste good?”

“Makoto, should we really be eating that much oil?”

“Is this the right temperature, Sir Makoto?!”

Mel and Anna were watching me skeptically, and Momo was my assistant. I wasn’t great at cooking, but I was able to rely on my memories from Earth to prepare something.

The ingredients were:

Potato (well, something similar)

Fish (caught from the mountaintop pool of water)

Oil (from some fruits that looked like olives—I'd squashed and pressed them)

Salt (from the temple's stores)

Flour (from powdering the wheat in the fields)

Those five ingredients were what I needed to cook the traditional meal of England: fish and chips.

This is about the best thing I can prepare.

Some sliced potatoes and floured fish fillets were crackling away in the hot, bubbling oil. The bubbles had been massive at first, but they were gradually getting smaller. Meanwhile, the potatoes and fish were turning a lovely golden brown.

Nearly done...

Using some makeshift chopsticks—twigs taken from a tree—I lifted the chips and fillets from the oil. I set them on some large leaves that we were using as plates. The final touch? A sprinkling of salt.

“Sir Makoto? Why are you salting the food with your hand so high up?”

“It tastes better that way.”

“Oh, I see!”

Actually, I was just repeating what I'd seen on some cooking program. Now that I thought about it, that show had used olive oil pretty frequently. I'd made this meal the same way by accident.

“It's done,” I announced. “Fish and chips.” I couldn't tell them the dish was from another world, so I just said it was from my hometown.

“Hm...” Mel scrutinized the food. “You just fried it and added salt.”

“W-Well,” Anna stammered. “He made it for us, so...”

The two of them hesitantly tucked in. After a bite, their eyes widened.

“So good!”

“It's delicious?!”

They both quickly took another bite.

Yup, fried food is the best!

Contrary to their enthusiasm, Momo was just staring at me.

“You're not going to eat?” I asked.

“I...” Her gaze dropped to my neck.

Ah. Apparently, she preferred her food raw.

“Here,” I said, undoing some buttons on my shirt and tapping my neck.

“Th-Thanks for the food,” she said before starting to drink.

While she was doing that, I picked up a chip and bit into it. *Better than expected. Maybe even the best meal I've eaten in this era.*

Junk food was officially added to our party's repertoire.

The Melancholy of Saint Anna

◇ Anna's Perspective ◇

With the Goddess of Fate's guidance, we arrived at the Sun Temple. The first thing we did was inspect the buildings and check for provisions. Of course, this hideout had been recommended by a goddess, so everything we needed was here. After settling in, Makoto cooked for us. We all ate, and finally, we had time to catch our breaths.

To think there's a place like this... I almost wanted to stay here in safety forever.

After a while, I heard Makoto and Momo talking.

"Momo, let's start magic training. You do what Mel says, and if you've got questions about water magic, come to me."

"What?! Let's relax some more, Sir Makoto!"

Wait, he's already starting training?!

Countless butterflies and fish made with water magic were floating through the air around him. There were many little birds as well. I wasn't exactly a skilled mage, but I knew how difficult that feat was. Even the white dragon, an expert by any measure, was looking aghast at him—this was further proof of his skill.

"I suppose you can rest for today," Makoto conceded. "Training'll start tomorrow." He turned and walked over to the edge of the spring.

"Where are you going?" Momo asked.

"There are water elementals over by the spring, so I'll train there."

Momo had an odd look on her face. *She probably wanted to spend her time relaxing with him.* I hesitated for a while before deciding to join him by the spring. He was meditating by the water, and I sat by his side.

"What's wrong, Anna?" he asked. It sounded like a completely normal question except for one small thing—his eyes were closed, so he shouldn't have been able to see my expression.

“You shouldn’t push yourself too hard,” I murmured. “After all, you were attacked by the demon lord in Laphroaig.”

Demon Lord Cain had ambushed us all just before we’d escaped the country. Remembering that close call made my body shake with mixed emotions: anger at my mentor’s death and fear of facing the demon lord. Honestly, I was physically and mentally exhausted, so I felt a lot like Momo. I couldn’t understand what had possessed Makoto to start training practically the moment we’d arrived here.

“Pushing myself?” he asked curiously. He opened his eyes and stared at me with an odd expression.

“I mean...” I trailed off, looking for the words. “Look, we might have a whole year, but we need to use it to get stronger so we can defeat the demon lords! You shouldn’t just throw yourself into training without a single break! If you do, you’ll—”

“This is normal for me.”

The wind left my sails.

“What?”

I couldn’t understand what he’d just said.

“There isn’t a moment I don’t spend training my water magic,” he explained. “Even when I’m sleeping.”

“Wh...”

Oh, right. He has spells going even while he’s asleep.

“You seem tired too, Anna. You should rest with Momo.” He offered me a kind smile.

He’s treating me just like her?! Like a child?! At this rate, I could hardly call myself a hero or a saint.

So instead, I stood next to him and started practicing sword swings.

He watched me steadily. It was kind of unsettling.



The two of us kept training for a while.

“Um...Makoto?” I asked. “How long do you keep going for? It’s getting dark.”

“I suppose...another six hours or so.”

“A-Are...are you serious?!”

He tilted his head, confused by my question.

I sighed. “I think I’m just going to turn in.”

“Rest well,” he replied, waving.

He wasn’t alone for long—Dia, the arch elemental, soon appeared at his side. They started to chat, and I was sure they kept on going for the whole six hours.

Will I...be able to keep up with him? I thought uneasily.

Chat with the Goddess of Fate and Her Nonbeliever

“You’re finally here, Makoto Takatsuki!”

“Huh? Ira?”

I was pretty sure I’d just been asleep in the Sun Temple. But now...I was in the Goddess of Fate’s domain. She must have summoned me.

“Makoto Takatsuki! Are you getting along well with Annie?!” She wore a determined expression as she swung up her finger and jabbed it close to my face.

Getting along? Why’s she wondering that? All of us had only just arrived at the temple, and we wouldn’t start actively training until tomorrow. Though...I suppose I *had* finally gotten time to sit down and have a proper chat with Anna.

“Slowly but surely, we’re getting friendlier,” I answered.

“Not enooooouugh!” Ira yelled.

“Uh?”

“Are you listening? Saint Anna and Abel the Savior are one and the same—you know that. Which means you will need to cooperate at length with Annie to defeat the Great Demon Lord!”

“I mean, I know that, but—”

“You’re certainly not acting like it! You’ve got such cuties in the future too, and yet you haven’t made a move at all! You beta!”

“What does *that* have to do with it?!” It wasn’t like I was going to date Anna or anything!

“Luckily, I have good news for you, Beta Makoto! I, Ira, also known as the Goddess of Love, will personally tell you how to raise her affection points!” She puffed up her—nonexistent—chest at that.

Hey, who do you mean “Beta Makoto”?!

“Can you stop calling me that?!” I exclaimed, trying to get her to end this conversation. Also... Really? Affection points? She sounded less like the Goddess of Love and more like the Goddess of Waifu Games.

“Makoto Takatsuki! You’re insulting me in your thoughts, aren’t you?!”

“Pardon me,” I apologized. Something she’d said *had* made me curious, though. “If you’re the Goddess of Love, then you must have plenty of experience in romance, right?”

There was a *long* pause.

“O-Of course I have experience.”

Really?

“What?! Are you doubting me?! I’m the Goddess of Fate! I couldn’t count the number of men I’ve dated on both my hands and feet!”

“Well, that’s impressive.” That meant she must’ve had more than twenty—at minimum. With those numbers, I could understand her looking down on me for my slow pace.

“So, what was your most recent boyfriend like?”

Another long silence passed.

“Huh? Erm, well...”

“Ira?” Why wasn’t she saying anything? “You weren’t lying about having more than twenty exes...right?”

“How could you say that?! Of course they’re real! Right, the latest! Yes, I remember! He had blond hair and sharp eyes!”

“Huh. So, where’d you meet?”

“Wh-Where? U-Um... We met...a-at work! It was a workplace romance!”

“At work. So, here?”

I looked around her domain. A pink carpet decorated the floor, and on top of it were some fancy-looking plush creatures, all animated and working tirelessly.

There was, however, not a single god to be seen.

“N-No! I don’t just work here. I attend regular meetings with the other goddesses, and I need to head to the heavens and report on the state of the western continent at least once a year, and...”

“And none of those places sound like somewhere you’d meet a guy.” Had she really had a workplace romance? “So, how’d he confess?”

“Wha?! His confession? Uh, well...”

I could barely understand what she was saying. *Yup...that settles it.*

“It was a lie, right?”

There was a third long pause.

“It was,” she confessed. “I’ve never had a boyfriend.”

“Never?!” She didn’t have any room to talk about *me* then! “Well, I don’t think you’ll have much to tell me about romance.”

“What was that?!” She followed up this exclamation with a wholly unfair series of smacks.

After that night, Ira appeared in my dreams every so often and gave me lots of advice (despite her complete lack of romantic experience).

Makoto Takatsuki Talks with an Elf Hero

“Let’s drink, Sir Makoto.”

“Sounds good, Johnnie.”

After arriving at the temple, Mel and I flew back to the dungeon town to check in. Johnnie had promptly invited me in for a drink. He was one of the members of the legendary party that would take down the Great Demon Lord one day, so I figured there was no harm in getting acquainted with him.

The town had a big tavern in the center, which was well supplied with both food and drink. I felt a little out of my depth—beautiful girls sat on either side of me, pouring my drinks and passing over food. Mel was a little ways away, having fun with her family.

The evening was around halfway over when the conversation turned—Johnnie’s voice grew more serious.

“Incidentally...I spoke with the Lady White Dragon.”

Oh...this must be something important.

“About what?” I asked, straightening. I had no idea what it could be.

“I heard from her that you are a virgin. Is it true?”

I choked on my drink. *Mel?! Did she have any concept of privacy?!*

I glared at her, but she looked away and pretended not to notice. *She definitely heard that—I know how sharp her ears are.*

“I see. So it is. That will not do.”

“Uh...Johnnie?” *What do you even mean by that?*

I noticed him making a beckoning gesture. At once, beautiful woman

after beautiful woman appeared beside us.

“Um...who exactly are these people?” I asked.

“I should introduce you. These are women working in the town’s brothel. When they heard that Sir Makoto—despite all his exploits—was inexperienced with women, they were rather eager to provide their services. Payment is, of course, unnecessary. Enjoy your night.”

I couldn’t respond immediately. It took me several long seconds to summon a single word.

“Pardon?”

“We’ll serve you tonight, Sir Makoto,” said one of the women.

“This way,” another added, casually placing a hand on my cheek. A soft, floral scent wafted from her skin.

I was feeling dizzy.

“Hey! What are you doing, Chief?!”

Julietta—the Hero of Wood—had apparently overheard our conversation. She came barreling over.

“What’s wrong, Julietta?” he asked.

“Don’t ‘what’s wrong’ me! Makoto has a lover waiting for him in his hometown!”

Oh yeah—I’d told her a bit about Lucy and Sasa. Somewhat bolstered by Julietta’s presence, I quickly spoke up. “Johnnie! I really appreciate the offer, but I promise I’m fine!”

“I see...” He seemed to slump slightly.

U-Uh? Had I offended him?

“Er, I really am grateful, but Momo and An—Abel are waiting at the temple. I’d also rather talk about you. I want to hear about your exploits!”

“Hm...about me?”

That seemed to cheer him up a little. The alcohol loosened his tongue, and I soon had him enthusiastically talking about his past hardships. He’d been living in the dark ages while the Great Demon Lord ruled, so merely existing had been a continuous struggle.

I listened excitedly, but Julietta soon stopped him.

“Enough already! This is all ancient history.”

Huh. Even though they’re both elves, they don’t seem to get along.

But then, Johnnie’s next words completely changed the mood.

“I think it must have been twenty years ago now. I came across Julietta,

orphaned in an attack by demons.”

“Ahh! Chief! No!”

“Though she was born with a hero skill, Julietta used to be such a scaredy cat. She couldn’t even sleep on her own—she’d often sneak into my bed.”

“When was that?!”

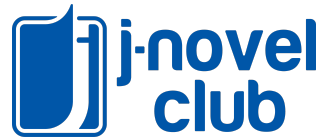
“But in the mornings, I’d often discover that she’d had...an *accident* during the night.”

“Stop it! Shut your trap right now!” Julietta demanded, covering his mouth with a hand. He must have been tipsy since he just laughed along happily.

Ah, it’s not that they don’t get along. She’s like a girl rebelling against her dad.

I watched them fondly, warmth spreading in my chest.

The celebration carried on late into the night, and before I knew it, I was waking up on the floor to an exasperated look from Mel.



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